Fortune's Fool

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Fortune’s Fool

by CoraWritesThings

Summary

In Louisiana, a serial killer dubbed “The Grimm Reaper” has murdered three people and left their corpses in twisted versions of fairytales. Jack Crawford sends Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter to follow the case’s leads, and their investigation leads them to the carnival, where an encounter with a mysterious fortune teller leaves Will shaken.

Now, it seems as though her predictions for Will are coming true...and that isn’t exactly great news, considering that they include deceit, death, and a deep, soulmate-like connection with Hannibal that holds the potential to be more destructive than everything else combined.

Notes

I cross-post here (AO3), Wattpad, and FFN as @CoraWritesThings. *If you find my fics anywhere else, please let me know, because that means they have been reposted without my permission.*

What started out as a NaNoWriMo 2019 project loosely inspired by a Tumblr prompt has ballooned into this monster of a case fic, and I have never been prouder. Huge kudos go, in no particular order, to: Jayse for being an endless sounding board for this fic; Zee for her continual support of me and my writing; my best friend for always reading all of my writing, no matter its quality, for over a decade and counting; and to OTP Prompts on Tumblr for posting the prompt that eventually led to this. Updates will be very slow and sporadic, but I promise that they will happen! This fic is my baby and I intend to finish it, however long that takes. Comments and kudos make my day, so please leave them if you feel so inclined. :) Enjoy!

The New Case

Not for the first time, Will Graham stood in Jack Crawford's office and reevaluated his life choices.

By and large, it wasn't the classroom part of his career that Will questioned. To say he *enjoyed* it would be a strong word, but he didn't *dislike* working at the Academy, either. His students learned pretty quickly that he didn't like eye contact and would give curt, abrasive answers if they tried to stop him after class, so he didn't have to socialize with them, which was a huge plus. Quantico was about an hour's drive from Wolf Trap, but the job gave him enough money to support himself and his seven dogs, and he didn't mind the drive. In fact, he looked forward to it. It was solitary. Quiet. As for the classes themselves...well, he made his living thinking about murder. As unusual as it may have seemed, he had no complaints there.

No, it wasn't the teaching part that had him questioning things. It was the fieldwork.

It felt like millennia ago, but it had only been a few months since Jack Crawford had walked into Will's classroom and asked to borrow his imagination. Will had wanted to say no, but when faced with a serial killer of eight young women across eight different Minnesota campuses...he'd known that he wouldn't have been able to live with himself if he could have caught him and instead let him go free. Jack had known it, too, the bastard. So Will had reluctantly said yes, and it had ended in him putting ten bullets in the killer's chest — and orphaning the killer's daughter, Abigail Hobbs, whom her father had been about to kill.

Will scrubbed a hand across his beard. Things had just gone downhill from there. Since then, he had suffered from disturbing nightmares and hallucinations, and with each serial killer he was tasked to profile, it got worse. Some days he felt as if the only thing keeping him from going insane was the steady presence of his unofficial psychiatrist and friend, Doctor Lecter.

Ironically, Hannibal Lecter had rubbed him the wrong way during their first meeting, rudely poking into his subconscious and psychoanalyzing him. It had rankled, especially since Will knew that Jack had set him up to it. But since then, Hannibal had become a ballast in Will's life. The doctor was eccentric, but he never seemed to pass judgment on Will's psyche or mental stability like other people did. Hannibal had become his friend, and together they were Abigail's legal guardians. Will found Hannibal refreshing.

And god knows that he could have used his company right about now, with Jack pacing behind his desk like a caged lion.

"What is it, Jack?" Will asked, since it didn't seem as though Jack were going to speak first. "I've got another class today at noon."

Jack waved it away as if it were a pesky fly. "Never mind that, Doctor Bloom can cover for you." He stopped pacing and looked Will dead in the eye — or at least he tried to, because Will was dutifully avoiding it. "I've got another case for you."

And there it was: exactly why Will had dreaded being called into Jack's office in the first place.

"The case couldn't wait until after noon?" he said, trying not to let his irritation show.

Jack shot him a look. "You know as well as I do that every minute counts in catching these killers."

Will sighed and glanced over at Jack's board. He had already placed pins and photos on the map for this killer's known bodies. From his stance near the doorway, it looked as if there were three within relatively close proximity to each other.

"I don't know how much use I'm going to be for you, Jack," Will said instead, ill-tempered. "I nearly died during the last case. So did Hannibal," he added, glancing in Jack's direction and raising an eyebrow.

Jack let out a heavy sigh, walked around his desk, and perched on the edge of it. He was a big man, broad-shouldered but surprisingly graceful, and well-respected in the field. He was also always glowering to some degree when he was on the job. Will was one of the only ones unafraid to be tetchy with him on a regular basis.

"That's why you're not going alone," said Jack placatingly, hands folded in front of him. "I'm sending you with Doctor Lecter."

Will grimaced and paced away from the door, running a hand through his unruly hair. He didn't want to admit it, but having Hannibal's company made him slightly less reluctant to agree. Jack probably knew that, too. Bastard.

"How many bodies?" he asked, even though he already knew the answer, if Jack's crime board was any indication.

"Three so far, all within New Orleans proper and the surrounding area. None of them fresh. The NOPD uploads their cases to the FBI database to catch connected homicides, and we were notified this morning of DNA matches for three of them. The leftover evidence is on its way to Price, Katz, and Zeller, but in the meantime, I want you and Doctor Lecter to get a head start on the legwork."

Will frowned and stopped pacing. "You're sending us to Louisiana? When?"

"Today."

Will raised his eyebrows and scowled. "A little short notice, don't you think, Jack?"

Jack spread his hands, again placating, and Will tried to suppress a spike of anger at the gesture. "The sooner we can get people down there, the better."

"And yourself?"

The edge of Jack's mouth quirked up at Will's impudence. "I will head down to join you and Doctor Lecter in a few days." He stood up and moved back behind his desk. "I've still got

paperwork to finish from the last case. Mister Budge left quite the mess."

Will wanted to strangle Jack for the snarky comment. Of *course* Tobias Budge had left a mess — he'd killed two police officers and one of Hannibal's patients and nearly killed Will and Hannibal both. It had been a good stroke of luck that Hannibal had had the strength, reflexes, and quick-thinking to overpower Tobias before he could kill him. But it had left Hannibal's office a mess, with two dead bodies (Tobias, and Franklyn Froideveaux, Hannibal's patient), and Hannibal had had to shut down his psychiatric practice for over a week to recover. It took days for him to stop limping. As for Will, he'd received deep cuts on his hands from the cello strings Tobias had tried to strangle him with, and for several days he could barely hear out of one ear from when he'd shot at Tobias in an attempt to free himself from his grip. Still, they had stopped a serial killer from harming anybody else. That was the most important thing.

Will sighed deeply and glanced again at Jack's board. As much as he wanted to tell Jack to stuff it, he knew he wasn't getting out of this, not with another killer still on the loose. And frankly, he would feel guilty if he said no. "Where are the case files?"

Jack gave a satisfied smile and reached for a stack of files on his desk. "I thought you'd never ask."

On the Road

The first thing Will did after he left Quantico was call Doctor Alana Bloom. He knew it was a cowardly move — she would be in her office, and she was going to be teaching his classes for him. The least he could do was ask her to take care of his dogs in person. But after their last encounter...well, there was a very good reason he didn't want to see her face-to-face or be in a room alone with her.

It was embarrassing, really. Alana was a kind, intelligent, and beautiful woman and a great colleague, but it hadn't been until the Hobbs case and Abigail's subsequent hospitalization that they had really talked much or even been alone in a room together. Will had awkwardly flirted with her for weeks, and just when he'd thought that he might be getting somewhere, she'd stopped by his house and caught him at the tail end of an auditory hallucination. Will had taken a hammer to his chimney and fireplace, certain that he'd heard the scratching of an animal trapped in there, only to come up empty. When he saw her face, he just *knew* that she'd realized that there hadn't been an animal. That it had all been in his head. So he'd kissed her, and she had rejected him. Looking back on it, it made sense why she had, but he'd been so off-balance, hurt, and confused that he'd driven over an hour in the snow to tell Hannibal about it.

It hadn't been one of Will's brightest moments. Thankfully, Hannibal hadn't made him feel stupid for it, although he had seemed a little exasperated. But the whole situation definitely made Will reluctant to see Alana again. He was already bad at socializing, so he could imagine this would be a thousand times worse. He didn't want to see the pitying but curious look in her eyes, as if he were a lab specimen being studied for his interesting mind, something to feel bad for but also to keep at arm's length. He didn't want to have the awkward conversation about how she still cared about him or how she would consider dating him if he was more stable or any of that bullshit. He didn't want to think about it. It would just make him feel all the more lonely and isolated.

So instead he called her.

Will waited to dial Alana's cell until he was on the highway, and she picked up after the third ring, concern coloring her voice.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Alana, it's Will Graham. Sorry for the late notice, but Jack's put me on a new case and I need someone to look after my dogs while I'm gone. Would you be able to do that?"

"Of course." Alana's tone was warm, maybe overly so — or was he reading into it? — and Will gripped the steering wheel harder than necessary before taking a deep breath and loosening his grip.

"Thanks, Alana. I appreciate it."

"No problem."

A long silence stretched between them. Will ran a hand across his beard and tried to think of something, anything, to say. He settled on: “And thanks for teaching my classes while I’m gone.”

Alana’s voice had a touch of wry amusement to it. “You’re welcome. I think Jack would have a fit if I didn’t.”

Will chuckled. Silence unfolded between them again, impossible to bridge. Finally, he began, “Look, Alana, I’m sorry —”

“No, don’t,” she said quickly. “I’m sorry, too. I was unprofessional. I...I gave you mixed signals because I was confused about my feelings.”

A sharp surge of bitterness stabbed through him. Before he could stop himself, he said icily, “And now you’re no longer confused?”

He regretted it instantly when he heard Alana’s sigh on the other end and imagined the pained look on her face. He gripped the steering wheel tighter as she said carefully, “Will, please don’t make this harder than it needs to be. We’ve already talked about this. I want to be your friend, and it’s not that I’m uninterested, but my...*professional* curiosity would get in the way of a healthy, functioning relationship.”

“As would my instability,” Will said with unmistakable bitterness.

Alana’s voice was quiet but resolved. “Yes. As would your instability.”

Will watched the dreary, late autumn Virginia landscape go by and said nothing. The silence stretched like a sticky spiderweb between them, too loaded and bogged down to be cleared away, until Alana said, “Will...”

“Thank you for agreeing to take care of my dogs, Alana.”

He hung up.

If Will hadn’t been on the highway, he would have rested his head on the steering wheel. It had been even worse than he feared, and he knew, although he didn’t want to admit it to himself, that he had actively made it worse. *What a fucking disaster.* No wonder he’d been single for so damn long.

He sighed heavily and pondered for a moment whether he should wait to call Hannibal until the bitterness had made its way out of his system, but he vetoed it almost immediately. Hannibal was a psychiatrist. He could handle it. And frankly, Will could use the reminder that *somebody* saw him as more than just a useful but unstable profiler or a fascinating psychiatric case.

Will dialed Hannibal’s home phone and listened to it ring as he watched the road. It was remarkable how much the gloom in his mind lifted just hearing the ring cut off as Hannibal picked up, followed by his heavily accented voice on the other end.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Hannibal, it’s Will. Did Jack call you already?”

“Funny you should ask, I just got off the phone with him.” Will heard the clink of ceramic in the background and imagined Hannibal in his kitchen, making lunch. His stomach nearly growled at the thought. “Another killer on the loose, hmm?”

“Yeah.” Will relaxed slightly, his grip loosening on the steering wheel. “Did Jack brief you on the case?”

“Only the barest of details.” From the lightness in Hannibal’s voice, Will could imagine the amusement on his face, betrayed only by the slight crinkling at the corners of his eyes. “He asked me if I would be able to come along with you to Louisiana under the pretense that two minds are better than one when catching a killer. But I doubt that is his only motivation for sending me.”

Will half-smiled, half-grimaced. “He doesn’t want me there alone,” he said, unable to mask his bitterness. “Not after the last case.”

“Nor should he,” Hannibal said reasonably. “You experienced a traumatic event. Anyone would be understandably shaken by such an experience.”

“You experienced it, too,” Will said, a little crossly. “Were *you* shaken?”

“Yes.” Hannibal’s response was immediate and matter-of-fact. “It is not every day that one’s patient dies followed by a close encounter with a serial killer.”

Will frowned slightly. “Did...” He cleared his throat. “How did it feel? To kill Tobias?”

He imagined Hannibal on the other end of the phone with the curiously neutral expression he got during conversations like these.

“Necessary,” Hannibal said simply. “He was going to kill me. I did what had to be done.”

Will nodded slowly, even though Hannibal couldn’t see him. The silence that followed felt nothing like the excruciating silences between him and Alana. With Hannibal, silence was comfortable. Contemplative. Unassuming and void of expectation. Will could exist more comfortably around Hannibal than most people he’d ever met, and he was feeling especially grateful for that now.

“Uncle Jack is worried about you,” Hannibal said, breaking the silence.

“Not worried enough not to send me on a new case,” Will grumbled.

“Jack is willing to sacrifice your well-being to catch his killers.” More ceramic clinked in the background and then halted. “I am not. If you are truly concerned, Will, I can step in as a medical professional and tell Jack no.”

Will shook his head vigorously before remembering that Hannibal couldn’t see him. “No, no, I...that won’t be necessary. I just wish Jack would *ask* me if I want to continue instead of telling me that I will.”

Hannibal hummed in affirmation, and Will felt slightly better. He drummed on the steering wheel.

“So, uh, did Jack tell you that he wants us to leave for Louisiana today?”

“Yes.”

“I was thinking we could meet at Dulles airport around two and book a flight to New Orleans, unless a later time works for you? My house is less than half an hour from the airport.”

“Perhaps three would be a better time. I still have to pack for the trip. Any idea how long it will be?”

Will shook his head. “No. These things can last anywhere from a few days to several weeks. Better pack for a long-term stay.”

“Okay, I shall meet you at the airport at three. Till then, Will.”

“Mmhmm. Bye.”

Will hung up, sighed, and spent the rest of the drive lost in thought, brow slightly furrowed.

Baggage

Before reaching his exit, Will stopped by a greasy little burger joint and grabbed lunch. He knew how to cook, and he could do it well — he made homemade food for his dogs, and one of his favorite recipes was Creole-style gumbo. But most days, Will didn't have the time or energy to make meals for himself. He never slacked on making food for his dogs, because they depended on him, but for himself...well, he ate a lot of packaged, pre-processed meals and takeout.

He slid into a sticky booth and ate his cheeseburger and fries, wiping the dripping grease away with a wad of napkins. Then he drove the rest of the way home. Will relaxed as the terrain became more and more sparse, ending in the middle of nowhere, Wolf Trap. It was a peaceful expanse, acres of rolling trees and chilly fog. His house stood in the middle of it all, a nondescript two-story place with just enough room for him to live comfortably with seven dogs. He could hear them barking with excitement as he got out of his car and approached the porch.

"Hi, Winston." Will's first genuine smile of the day broke across his face as he opened the front door, the dogs crowding around him. "Tst! Zoe! Don't nip at Buster like that. You know he doesn't like that."

Zoe whined and thumped her tiny tail, her lower jaw jutting out in a perpetual pout.

Will let the dogs out and watched them run around the yard with glee. Some of the gloom and bitterness from earlier dissipated in the presence of his dogs, whom he cared about more than anything else in the world. He was already missing them, and he hadn't even left for New Orleans yet.

He shoved his hands in his coat pockets and sighed, his breath curling in front of him in the frigid Virginia air. He had other reasons to be reluctant for this case besides the nightmares, hallucinations, and recent near-death experience, as if those weren't reason enough. Will had grown up in Louisiana, moving from boatyard to boatyard with his father. His mother had left when he was very young, so he never knew her, and his family was always poor. The memories that visiting New Orleans would likely dredge up were not always pleasant. There were things about Louisiana that Will missed, but he was worried about the toll on his already unstable mental state. God knew that anything that could tip him in a worse direction should be avoided.

Will whistled to his dogs and let them back into the house. Then he wrote a note for Alana on how to make the dogs' food and began to pack for the trip. His dogs' eyes followed his every move with a curiosity and cheerfulness that Will wished he could distill and feel for himself.

Eventually, he slowed to a stop and sat on the edge of his bed. His suitcase was full, and he'd walked through the house to make sure that everything he needed was packed away. Will sighed heavily. He was so tired, and the day wasn't even half over.

He scooted into bed, set his alarm for thirty minutes, and whistled to his dogs, who yipped with excitement and immediately clambered into bed with him. He knew that he shouldn't, but he had trained the dogs to know when they were and weren't allowed in his bed, so he figured it was fine. He needed this. Will lay down, fluffy, unconditional warmth on all sides, and slept.

Dulles International was not particularly busy, understandably so for a weekday in the early afternoon. Will pulled his wheeled suitcase behind him through the half-full corridors until he found Hannibal where they'd agreed to meet, in front of one of the restaurants on the lower level of the terminal.

Hannibal Lecter was an oddly handsome man, with sharp, angled cheekbones and slowly graying hair styled to perfection. He was about an inch taller than Will and always dressed impeccably. Even though they were about to get on a flight, he wore a fancy zipper-sweater over a dark patterned tie and light blue dress shirt, with pressed pants and sleek dress shoes. If Will were a different person, he would've felt self-conscious about his perpetual bedhead, rumpled plaid button-down, and jeans. But he wasn't. His only acknowledgement of the difference was to glance at Hannibal's large wheeled suitcase and mutter,

"You have enough room for all your suits in there?"

Hannibal's mouth quirked up in amusement. "Not all of them, but enough for at least a week."

Will grunted in response.

If Hannibal took any issue with Will's grumpiness, he certainly didn't show it. Instead, he extended his arm in a graceful sweep towards the ticket booths on the upper level. "Shall we?"

After some haggling, showing of government-issued IDs and travel cards, and negotiating for cheaper seats, they booked a five-twenty PM flight from Dulles to New Orleans that had a few seats left. Then they made their excruciating way through TSA into Concourse C. There, they could finally rest and wait for their flight.

Will could feel a headache coming on, so he fished around for his aspirin and swallowed it dry, which earned him a look from Hannibal. However, the doctor declined to comment. They sat in comfortable, mutual silence, Will with his eyes closed and Hannibal sitting stiffly in the uncomfortable airport seat, watching the people go by.

Will dozed fitfully until Hannibal laid a gentle hand on his shoulder and said quietly, "They just called our flight."

Will rubbed sleep from his eyes and nodded, feeling uncomfortably feverish. As soon as they were on the plane, he closed his eyes again and swallowed, trying to push back the sick feeling pervading his entire body. Within a few minutes of takeoff, he was dozing again — that is, until he heard the tell-tale clip-clop of hooves coming down the aisle. He didn't want to look and confirm what he already knew would be there, but the sound stopped when it reached where he and Hannibal were sitting. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes.

Will was looking right into the moist, black eyes of the creature that had been haunting his dreams and nightmares for weeks, perhaps months. It was a tall, fully-grown stag with large, smooth antlers and sleek black feathers in place of fur. It snuffled quietly, blowing hot air in his face.

He blinked and jerked away. The feathered stag was gone. A tall flight attendant wearing high heels that made soft clicking sounds was pushing a cart with drinks down the aisle. Will wiped sweat from his forehead and glanced at Hannibal, who had the window seat and was calmly sipping from a small cup of water.

"More nightmares?" Hannibal asked quietly, gesturing towards a second cup of water on the tray he'd pulled out from the back of the seat in front of him. "That's for you."

"Thank you." Will's voice grated against his vocal chords, and he downed the water in a few quick gulps.

He didn't go back to sleep, too afraid of what he'd see when he opened his eyes.

Welcome to the South

By the time the plane landed in the New Orleans metropolitan area, Will was drained and ready to crash at the nearest halfway-decent hotel. He and Hannibal made their way to the baggage claim and then out into the parking lot. It was warmer than it had been in Virginia, even in the darkness of a mid-November night, and humid, with only a faint breeze to stir the air.

Once they secured a rental car, Will slid into the driver's seat, while Hannibal slid into the passenger's. Hannibal held a flimsy, foldable map of New Orleans that the rental man had handed him.

"I must admit I've never visited New Orleans before," Hannibal said, clutching the map and looking a little lost.

Will felt a small stab of satisfaction, as mean as that was. Hannibal usually seemed so put-together and all-around knowledgeable, even in new situations. This was one of the few times Will had seen a hint of genuine discomfort in his facial expressions or body language, so sue him if it gave him a surge of quiet confidence, especially given his own expertise.

"Yeah?" Will said, putting the key in the ignition. "Well, I lived in New Orleans for a few years, so I have a general idea of where we're going."

After a cursory glance over the map, Will backed out of the parking lot and headed for Metairie. Not technically a city of its own, it sat between Kenner, where the airport was, and New Orleans city proper. Will hoped that the hotels might be slightly cheaper there than in the city — and the first body had been found in Metairie, so it made sense to set their base of operations there, even if only temporarily.

Will drove with the windows down. Out here, away from the city center, the smells were softer and slightly more natural. Wind from the north brought the briny smell of the lake, while wind from the south brought the industrialized smell of the Mississippi, which snaked its way through lower Louisiana. Will had hoped that the breeze would blow away the worst of his sickliness, but instead the humidity stuck uncomfortably to his sweaty skin. He swore inwardly. He really couldn't afford to be sick on this case, especially when it was just him and Hannibal out in the field.

Fucking Jack. Some days he seriously resented him.

Thankfully, it was a short drive from the airport to the nearest hotel that Will had deemed acceptable and not-too-pricey. If Hannibal had any objections as to the quality of the place, he didn't make them known. Will was grateful for that — Hannibal may have been rolling in money, but there was only so much he could afford on a teacher's salary, just as there was only so much that his federal travel card would cover.

Will found a place to park, and they entered. As they approached the front desk, the desk clerk glanced up from his computer to greet them. Something about his face changed as soon

as he saw them. He gave them a poorly-disguised distasteful once-over before he drawled, "How can I help you two *fine gentlemen* this evening?"

It didn't take an empath to catch the mocking sneer underneath a thin veneer of politeness. The clerk's smug judgment, as if he knew anything about them or their relationship, made Will's blood boil. But if this guy wanted to play the polite asshole, two could play that game. Will immediately mirrored the clerk's passive-aggression and gave him his best shit-eating smile.

"Two single rooms, please," Will said, flipping out his government ID and slipping back into his faint Louisiana drawl easily, as if he had never trained himself out of it. He relished the way the color drained from the clerk's already white face as his eyes landed on the ID. "Does this hotel offer a lower federal rate?"

The man's countenance changed completely. He was clearly flustered and mortified, which intensified as he cottoned on to Will's native accent. "Oh, uh, yes, sir, yes, we do. Um. Will, uh, those rooms be connected, sir?"

Will glanced at Hannibal, who said politely, "Connected is fine."

"Yes, sir," the clerk said hastily, typing away at the computer. He was avoiding eye contact with Will, *very poorly,* Will thought spitefully. "Two singles with queen beds, a connecting door, and, um. For how many nights?"

Will scrubbed a hand across his beard. "Let's go with a week, to start." He flashed the clerk another sharp, predatory smile. "That may change, you understand."

The old man looked ready to sink into the floor and disappear forever as he muttered his understanding.

When everything was finally squared away, they left the front desk and headed to their rooms on the third floor. On the way up, Hannibal said thoughtfully, "I think the employee assumed that we were not here on official business. His initial behavior was rudeness veiled as social niceties."

Will snorted, half-bitter and half-disdainful. "Welcome to the South, Hannibal," he said, leaning harder into his natural accent. "Where everyone is rude, but they're *so damn polite* about it. They're usually not so overt about their homophobia, but two men coming into a hotel together to look for a place to stay? That's *blasphemy.*" Will shook his head, trying to clear away the anger that had settled there. "If I'd remembered, I'd've warned you it was a possibility. It's generally less overt in New Orleans, but more overt the farther from the city center you go. Good rule of thumb for the entire country, I suppose."

Hannibal hummed in affirmation. When they reached their rooms, he glanced at Will.

"Letting your old inflections come through?" he said, eyes passing over Will's lips.

For a moment, Will felt self-conscious, but it passed immediately. Of all people, he highly doubted Hannibal was judging. Hannibal knew what it was like, with his unusual Lithuanian

accent causing stares and odd looks whenever he spoke around strangers.

“I spent most of my life in northern and central Louisiana and went to school in New Orleans. I learned to cover up my accent when I moved north so people’d take me more seriously, but down here, I see no reason to fight it.”

Hannibal pursed his lips. “I see no reason to fight it in general. No one dialect has superiority over another. Yours has its charm.”

Will looked at Hannibal, but he couldn’t read his face; it had fallen into that curiously neutral expression of his. After a moment of contemplation, Will figured he was being serious.

“Thanks,” he said. “If only other people thought that way.” He unlocked his door. “Good night, Hannibal.” He made to lug his suitcase into his room, but Hannibal stopped him with a sharp “wait.”

“Are you not going to eat dinner?” he said, sounding slightly affronted.

Will shrugged. “I’m tired. It’s been a long day. I can eat in the morning.”

“No,” Hannibal said firmly. “Neglecting your nutritional health in order to get more sleep is unbeneficial in the long run. Skipping meals is not going to help you solve this case, long day or not. We’re going to dinner.”

Will let out a slow sigh, running his fingers through his hair. He was exhausted and a little feverish and had a building headache threatening to reignite his skull, but the thought of trying to argue with Hannibal made him feel even more bone-weary.

“Fine,” he said eventually. “But only if you pick the restaurant and do the driving.”

Hannibal smiled genuinely. “It would be my pleasure.”

Dining Differences

Will regretted letting Hannibal choose the restaurant as soon as he drove them to one of the fanciest restaurants Will had ever seen in New Orleans, much less ever eaten at. No wonder Hannibal had sent him back to his room to put on nicer clothes — he was still woefully underdressed, despite having added a gray blazer and a tie to his outfit. Hannibal had swapped out his fancy zipper-sweater for a three-piece suit, and he was looking in his element once again. Will resented him slightly for it, the more so as his headache threatened to intensify again.

After a few minutes, a server showed them to their table, which looked like a much fancier version of booth seats at a diner. Another server brought them glasses of water and a small basket of French rolls and introduced himself before bowing out.

Will took a sip of water, opened the menu, and nearly had a heart attack — the appetizers were all over ten dollars, and most of the entrées were more than thirty dollars each. *Of fucking course Hannibal would choose one of the priciest restaurants in New Orleans,* he thought angrily. *I could get quality gumbo for far less than this.* He gave the menu a quick once-over before giving up and restricting himself to the appetizer section. Hell, the pan-seared scallop appetizer was twenty dollars by itself. Even the soups were over ten bucks. There was no way he was spending fifty dollars on one dinner.

As Will closed his menu, Hannibal looked up from his and smiled. “Do you know what you’re getting?”

“Uh, yeah, I might get the sweet potato and poached oyster soup.”

“That’s all?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s not enough for dinner. It’s hardly an appetizer.”

“Thanks, I hadn’t noticed,” Will snarked. “It’s almost as if I was ordering off the appetizer section of the menu.”

Hannibal folded his menu. “Forgive me, Will. I am merely concerned because you haven’t eaten since I’ve seen you.”

Will scowled. “I told you I wanted to go to sleep, didn’t I? I’m not terribly hungry.”

Actually, he was *very* hungry, not having eaten since the burger and fries at lunchtime, but the prices on the menu had clamped down on his appetite. As if he could read his mind, Hannibal said, “And yet your stomach was growling on the way over here.”

“Are we eating dinner, Doctor Lecter, or are we back in therapy?” Will asked scathingly.

The corners of Hannibal's lips ticked up in amusement. "We are having a conversation, though dinner and therapy do not have to be mutually exclusive."

Will clenched his jaw and leaned back in his seat, looking away from Hannibal and across the restaurant. He didn't want to let out his anger and resentment in such a highbrow place, although a childish part of him was sorely tempted. He breathed in and out deeply to control himself.

"I don't need you to police my choice of nourishment," Will said slowly, turning back to Hannibal. "You're not my guardian...or even my official psychiatrist."

Will knew the jab had landed when silence followed his assertion. Hannibal scrutinized him, eyes dark in the dim of the restaurant, and Will met his gaze with defiance. Then Hannibal said,

"You are not the poor boy at the mercy of your father's whims anymore, Will. You don't have to starve yourself for lack of funds."

Anger crashed over Will like a wave of dirty seawater.

"Haven't you ever heard that it's extremely rude to comment on other people's wealth?" Will snapped. "Or are you too rich for that to have crossed your mind?"

"Will —"

"I live off a professor's salary with seven dogs, Hannibal, has that ever occurred to you? It's a matter of *economy* that I choose not to spend a fortune at restaurants that think it's okay to charge fifteen dollars for one appetizer!"

Hannibal opened his mouth and Will pointed an angry finger at him. "And don't even start with the 'it's on the FBI's dime' thing. You get a certain allowance a day and past that, it's all on you. You know that." Will leaned back in his seat, glaring at Hannibal. "If you're going to get upset at anyone over my *nutritional health*, this one's on you. *You* picked the restaurant."

Hannibal didn't point out that Will had only agreed to eat if he picked where they went. Instead, he unfolded his menu and said,

"Apologies, Will. That was rude of me."

Will clenched and unclenched his jaw. As the intensity of his anger began to recede, he felt even more tired than before. He scrubbed a hand across his face and wearily reopened his menu.

"*IF* I was going to order an entrée, it would probably be the gulf shrimp 'n' grits with bacon, or the applewood-smoked scallops with corn grits and mushrooms. *But*," Will added sharply, "they're both over twenty-five dollars, and then adding an appetizer and alcohol on top of that? That's highway robbery. No one in their right mind willingly pays fifty dollars for one meal. Rich or not."

The corners of Hannibal's eyes crinkled, but he didn't take the bait. They sat in silence until their server reappeared, where Will ordered a glass of red wine and the sweet potato and oyster soup. Hannibal ordered a much fancier wine, roasted duck breast with braised apples and walnuts, and the shrimp 'n' grits. Will cocked an eyebrow, but Hannibal merely looked back, his face neutral.

Sure enough, when the server came with the entrées and Will finished his soup, Hannibal moved the shrimp 'n' grits across the table to Will's side and dug into his roasted duck as if it was perfectly normal to insult a friend's wealth and then order food for them. Will didn't know whether to get angry, refuse to take it, thank him, or just eat it. When the thought of starting another argument made his head throb, he chose the latter and dug into the food without a word. It turned out to be some of the best shrimp and grits he'd ever eaten, although the price tag still made his chest ache a little.

Eventually, the server came by again and asked if they wanted dessert. Hannibal looked at Will inquiringly, but he shrugged insolently and leaned back in his seat, so Hannibal said, "The pumpkin cream cake, please, two forks."

Will pursed his lips but said nothing. Soon, the server brought them their cake slice. This time Will chose to savor it *without* thinking about the price tag — or looking at Hannibal, for that matter.

When they finished, the server came by and asked, "One check or separate?"

Will opened his mouth, but before he could speak, Hannibal said smoothly, "One, please."

"Hannibal!" It came out slightly louder than Will would have liked, and he tried to ignore the server's startled glance in his direction. "Don't," he said fiercely, lowering his voice. "I can pay for my own."

"Nonsense, I said I would take you to dinner, didn't I? It would be my pleasure."

Will gritted his teeth. "If this is yet more pity for the *poor boy* with his *professor's salary*, I don't want it."

Hannibal frowned slightly at him across the table. "I would never insult you with my pity. Consider it my treat." He turned to the server. "One, please."

The server nodded and disappeared, clearly not wanting to get in the middle of their spat.

"You know that even *if* the FBI grants you personal per diem for this trip, you won't be reimbursed for it until after we return, right?" Will said. "The process takes forever, you need to have copies of all your receipts, and they're only going to cover like sixty dollars per day."

Hannibal waved it away. "I chose a restaurant without consideration for what you would prefer. The least I can do is pay for our meal. Besides, you said it yourself, there is only so much that the FBI will cover, even for regular employees such as yourself. It would be unfair to expect you to foot the rest of your bill under these circumstances." Will opened his mouth

to protest, but Hannibal added, “Courtesy, not pity, Will. It’s not a problem at all. It’s my pleasure.”

Will slowly closed his mouth. It was clear that he’d lost the argument, since the server had already left to get the check, but he wasn’t exactly sure how he felt about it. On the one hand, he was still a little angry at Hannibal for bringing him to an expensive restaurant and then calling him out for not ordering much. On the other hand, he was too tired to hold onto intense anger for too long, and a small part of him appreciated that Hannibal had decided to cover his meal and order him more food. Maybe that left him neutral.

The server came back with the check, Hannibal paid for their meal, and they got up to leave. It was past ten o’clock by the time Hannibal drove them back to the hotel. The desk clerk avoided looking at them as they came in, but Will couldn’t care less at this point what was going through the damn old man’s head. All he wanted was some more aspirin and a good night’s sleep, and only the former was guaranteed.

“Good night, Will,” Hannibal said when they reached their rooms.

Will grunted in response and closed his door louder than necessary. The end of this case couldn’t come soon enough.

Raymond Frank Kennedy

Morning came far too early for Will, who slipped in and out of feverish nightmares until he was unsure what was reality and what was fantasy. The only thing he could trust to be real was the sweat running down his body and soaking his clothes, although even that was suspect. Finally, his alarm clock went off at six-thirty. He groaned and heaved himself out of bed and into the shower. It was only a small consolation that he could rinse the sweat from his skin, since he couldn't find a comfortable temperature to set the faucet; the hot water felt scalding, and the cold water sent him into convulsing shivers. His whole body ached as if he had the flu.

Will was in a horrible mood when he got out of the shower, dressed, and knocked on the door that connected Hannibal's room to his.

"I'm going down to breakfast," he said loudly. "I want to leave here for the first crime scene around eight."

Hannibal acquiesced to meeting him downstairs for breakfast, seemingly unperturbed by his grumpiness. He was, however, perturbed by the breakfast selection, poking at the lumpy oatmeal and steering clear of the hotel's soggy-looking bacon. If Will had been in a better mood, Hannibal's thinly-disguised distaste would've amused him, but instead, it barely registered as he threw back more aspirin to curb his headache. He was happy to get out of the hotel and on the road, if only to have something to distract him.

The first crime scene was located in Metairie, a few blocks from Lafreniere Park. Will parked a block away from the crime scene so he could get a better feel for the place. The area was deceptively peaceful — plain brown one- and two-story houses, the occasional basketball hoop or swimming pool, sidewalks, old trees. Nothing out of the ordinary. The victim's house appeared no different than the rest, except for slightly longer grass in the front yard. It had been taken over by the city and unoccupied for months. Nobody wanted to buy a house where a murder had recently occurred.

Will had looked at the case files on the plane, but he stood in the driveway and scanned the first case file again anyway. The victim was a 67-year-old Caucasian male, Raymond Frank Kennedy, found in his home in August. With no living relatives except for an estranged daughter, it had taken over a week for his body to be discovered. It had decomposed substantially in the Louisiana heat, which had affected the quality of the crime scene, but the cause was clear: he'd been hacked to death with an ax.

Neither the weapon nor the culprit had been found yet. Will suspected that that had something to do with the victim himself: when police had ID-ed the body, Kennedy had shown up in the registered sex offender database as a repeat child molester. It was entirely plausible that they hadn't tried as hard as they could to find the perpetrator. As a former homicide detective — and from New Orleans, no less — Will knew that law enforcement officers were as fallible as the rest of the population. A quiet part of him didn't blame them if

they had let Kennedy's death slide, even if he didn't want to admit it. Sex offenders were a special kind of sick, and child predators even more so.

Will walked slowly up the driveway to the front door. It took him a moment to register that Hannibal was following behind him. He was surprisingly quiet. There was something about Hannibal's presence that made Will less uncomfortable and jumpy than usual. Will hated looking at crime scenes by himself, but he also hated them with company. Jack's presence was always a sharp thorn in his side, taking up room and cluttering up his mind. Bystanders and police unaccustomed to Will's methods liked to stare openly and gossip. The FBI's forensics team was better, but they still gave him concerned, sidelong glances when he was trying to work. And left alone, sometimes he feared that he would lose his grasp on reality completely. Hannibal was an acceptable middle ground, an anchoring force without being distracting. He could get used to that.

Will stopped and glanced from the file to the door. "There was no sign of forced entry," he murmured. "So the victim either knew his assailant, or..."

He didn't finish his sentence, and Hannibal didn't ask him to. Will took the key out of his pocket, procured for him by the NOPD, and unlocked the door.

Inside the door was a thin entryway from which open doorways led to various rooms. It was dark throughout and devoid of furniture, with curtains drawn. The living room was to the right, while a half bathroom was on the left. Following the hallway to the back of the house led to where the dining room and the kitchen met.

Will did a full once-over following the details of the file, which were already burned into his memory. The house was one story, with one-and-a-half baths and one bedroom. The whole place felt strangely claustrophobic, and it was dusty, its aura reeking of disuse.

Will walked back into the empty dining room, which was open to the kitchen.

"He died here," he murmured to no one in particular, eyes roaming over the floor.

The crime scene crew had done a good job of cleaning the blood from the walls, but the dining table, chairs, and original flooring hadn't been salvageable. The only furniture left in the house were the kitchen appliances and the clunky washer-dryer set shoved into a crevice near the bedroom.

Hannibal stood silently by his side, apparently content to observe and listen. That served him well. Will slowly stalked around the edge of the room to where the meager backyard was accessible by a sliding glass door.

"Typical inside lock...unlocked and untampered with when the investigators arrived..." Will frowned. "Something doesn't add up."

Hannibal spoke for the first time since they'd parked. "What makes you say that?"

"You can't pick the lock of a sliding glass door when the lock's on the inside. You have to mess with the door frame or break the glass, but there's no sign of forced entry anywhere."

Will opened the case file again, more out of habit rather than necessity. Given the state of decomposition, the coroner had placed the time of death within a 24- to 36-hour window. If Will was right about the assailant, he would have scoped out the place in the daytime and attacked at night, which meant... Will abruptly shut the file, unlocked the sliding glass door, and strode down the hallway to the front door.

“Killer came in through the back,” he threw over his shoulder. “Kennedy must’ve left his back door unlocked.”

Hannibal followed him curiously. Will relocked the front door and went around the outside of the house. The backyard was separated from the neighbor’s with a simple but tall wooden fence, which meant that the neighbors wouldn’t have seen the assailant testing the windows and doors, even in broad daylight. Will belatedly wondered if any fingerprints would be left but immediately dismissed it. It was unlikely that fingerprints would last when exposed to months of weather.

Will breathed in deeply, closed his eyes, and laid out the information in his head. He could see everything: the killer’s movements, the blood splatters and the way the dark red liquid pooled under the body, the brutal separation of flesh from muscle from bone with each swing of the ax, the careful planning and escape...

And then he was under, and in, and dear god this never got easier.

Especially since what he imagined and pieced together at crime scenes didn’t disturb him anywhere near as much as it should.

Unfair Fight

What made Will Graham a useful tool for Jack Crawford and the FBI was the same thing that made him a riveting psychiatric case, a freak show, and an endless supply of (mostly) untrue gossip for reporters and journalists: his empathy. More specifically, his empathy when extended to serial killers. It meant that he could get into killers' heads, reconstruct their thoughts, and catch them because he knew what drove them to kill. His strong memory and eye for detail were just as important in his opinion, if not more so, but that was less *interesting*, he thought spitefully. Less bizarre. Too *mundane*.

Well, maybe they had a point. There was a good reason he didn't like psychiatrists poking around in his head. There were things up there that he never unpacked, and he certainly didn't want somebody else to do so for him and judge every goddamn thing they pulled out of those moth-infested boxes.

Right now was a very good example of why.

Will stood outside the gate leading into the victim's backyard, eyes closed and breathing measured as he filtered out the unnecessary information from his environment and filled in what he needed instead. When he opened his eyes, he was alone. The general buzz of daytime was gone, replaced by the croaking of frogs, squeaking of bats fluttering in the trees, and the songs of cicadas and crickets. The only light came from the light pollution seeping into the night sky over New Orleans and the porch lights from nearby houses. But he could tell by weight and shape that he held an ax. He didn't need his vision for that.

Will reached out in the dark, found the latch on the gate, and opened it slowly, carefully. The hinges squeaked slightly in protest but were otherwise quiet. He left the gate cracked open for an easy escape and slipped through.

Pale light spilled from the sliding glass door into the backyard, its watery beam cutting through the dark. Will stood silently against the wall by the door, laying in wait. The light flickered against the grass as the person inside moved from the kitchen into the dining room, and after their shadow passed, he spared the quickest of glances inside.

The dining room was strangely barren, with only a wooden table and two chairs. An old white man stood with his back to the door, tall but stooped and weak. His hands shook almost imperceptibly as he set a microwaved dinner down on the table.

It wasn't a fair fight. It wasn't supposed to be.

This was his design.

The old man went back into the kitchen for a utensil, and Will took the opportunity to test the back door. It was still unlocked, by a stroke of luck; the old man had forgotten to lock it, or maybe he just never saw the need to. That would come back to haunt him very soon. Will darted back into the shadows as the old man came back into the kitchen with a fork. Pulled out a chair. Sat down. Frowned at the back door, which was open an inch.

As he stood up to close the door, Will lunged and pulled it open. The old man cried out in shock, anger and fear distorting his pale face. He took a step back reflexively and knocked into his chair, then threw out his hand to steady himself against the table.

Will struck. The old man lifted his hands in a futile attempt to block the ax, and his fork clattered to the floor. Drops of hot liquid hit Will's face as blood splattered across the table and floor.

He swung again. Bones splintered under the heavy ax blade like glass. One of the man's hands was now half a palm and a thumb; the rest was bone shards and pulp. Another swing took two fingers off the other hand and sunk into the old man's chest, lodging in the ribcage but missing all the vital organs.

That was alright; Will wasn't aiming for a clean kill. This wasn't cold-blooded. This was *heat* and *rage* and *disgust*. He wanted the man to suffer. He wanted him to go down crying and screaming for help like the innocent children he had hurt. Nobody would help him. Nobody would miss him. Nobody would care that he was gone.

This was his design.

Will tugged the ax from the man's chest and swung again, catching him in the shoulder. Then again, in the other one. The old man buckled and collapsed on his knees, gurgling blood. It was flowing faster now, almost black in the low light. It dripped from the meager furniture, pooled on the floor, stained the walls. It was in Will's mouth and hair. On his clothes. A lone line of droplets tainted the abandoned microwave dinner on the table.

He swung the ax again, and again, and again. Off came the lower half of an arm; there went the jaw; now the face, and across the abdomen, and straight through the spine. Will kept swinging and swinging, until the *thing* in front of him was nothing more than a bloody hunk of muscle and spilled guts and splintered bone.

Finally, he stopped, chest heaving from exertion. His blood sang. He'd done it. He'd actually done it. Raymond Frank Kennedy was dead, and parents across the area could sleep easy knowing that he had been removed from their community.

Will stood over the body, blood pooling around and under his shoes, the ax's handle slippery in his grip, and smiled.

"*This* is my design."

Will's eyes flew open. For a moment, he was disoriented. It was daylight again. Instead of the gate where he'd closed his eyes, he was standing in the empty dining room. There was no dead body. He wasn't drenched in blood or holding an ax. As he struggled to control his breathing, he became aware of Hannibal's presence a few feet away, and then it hit him.

"It wasn't in cold-blood," Will croaked. "He... It might have been premeditated, but it was still a crime of passion." He ran a shaky hand across his beard. "He, uh...I think it was his first kill. He'd never done it before."

Will began to pace around the edge of the room, restless and a little feverish.

“He thought he was doing the right thing. In getting rid of Kennedy, I mean. He saw him as a threat to any kids in the area, and since the police weren’t going to do anything about it, he took matters into his own hands. I don’t think he expected it to be so easy, but he knew well enough not to leave the weapon behind.”

He stopped pacing, his jaw working.

After a few moments, Hannibal said, “So he’s a fledgling killer, just spreading his wings. In his teens, perhaps? Early twenties?”

Will frowned. “I don’t know. It’s possible.” He began pacing again, slower this time. “But I don’t *feel* youth. He’s not unsure of himself or angry at the world or his circumstances. He wasn’t hot-headed enough to leave the weapon or linger over the body. This was his first kill, yes, but there’s still some kind of experience there, and not in the typical psychopath way.” Will stopped pacing and turned towards Hannibal. “He might not even have a history of violence. I don’t know.”

Hannibal pursed his lips, but he looked thoughtful, not annoyed. “So we check out the next crime scene and go from there.”

Will nodded slowly.

They locked up the empty house and walked to the car. Will sighed quietly to himself as he took the car out of park and turned them towards the next crime scene.

This was going to be one hell of a long day.

Linda Harrington

The second crime scene was located in Chalmette, a small, sparsely-populated area on the opposite side of New Orleans proper from Metairie. It was bordered on one side by the Mississippi River and on the other by a swath of shrinking wetlands.

As they crossed into Chalmette, Will motioned to their left at a desolate stretch of grass that ended in trees several hundred feet away.

“That’s where we’re headed,” he said without taking his eyes off the road.

“‘The Woodlands’?” Hannibal asked, catching a glimpse of the sign.

“Yeah, it’s connected to the wetland observatory. Till they sell it to build houses, at least.” Will snorted.

He immediately felt a little twinge of guilt for his cynicism, though not enough to retract his statement. The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina was more visible here than in Metairie, so it made sense for them to want to rebuild. Many of the houses had been wiped off the face of the map. He kept his eyes on the road and tried not to think of how his father had fared after the natural disaster.

Within a couple of minutes, they reached the observatory. The pavement beneath their tires turned to gravel as Will pulled the car into the empty circle driveway and parked. Then he took out the second case file.

The victim was a 52-year-old Caucasian female, Linda Harrington, found dead in the woods outside of the 40 Arpent Wetlands Observatory. Her body had been discovered far quicker than the last, as she left behind a husband and three kids. She was reported missing in mid-September and found a day later. Cause of death: strangulation.

The case had gone cold after only a few weeks. Her husband and kids were all accounted for on the night of the murder, and police had no leads to point to anybody else in the victim’s life. The murderer hadn’t left any usable samples on the victim. It was only until everything from the crime scene had been processed that the investigators secured his DNA through a small hair that had caught on the rope he’d used to tie her to the tree.

Will got out of the car, case file in hand, and waited for Hannibal to join him. It was windier and slightly cooler here than it had been in Metairie. The wind coming off the lake brought a hint of brininess with it. Will was suddenly grateful that he had gotten used to northern autumns and winters, because the lake’s chilling effect didn’t feel cold at all in comparison.

Hannibal walked around to his side of the car, hands in his overcoat pockets.

“We’ll be walking into the trees,” Will said, glancing down at Hannibal’s most likely exorbitantly expensive shoes.

Hannibal pursed his lips in the equivalent of shrugging his shoulders. “I was unaware of where this case might take us today, so I’m prepared for whatever you need.”

Will was skeptical, but he didn’t argue. He set off across the grass, and Hannibal followed, opting not to match his urgent stride.

The sky overhead was overcast. At the edge of the woods, one of the trees was tied with a thick yellow ribbon. A metal cross, painted white, was planted at the base and surrounded by bright, fake flowers. Carved into the cross were the words: *in loving memory of Linda Jean Harrington, June 29, 1958-September 22, 2010. May she rest in peace in the glory of God’s Kingdom forever, Amen.*

Will stopped for a moment in front of the memorial. “Looks like we’ve got a religious victim. Or at least religious family members.”

“Many people hold onto god for comfort,” Hannibal said. “It is an appealing idea that we could live on, even after death.”

Will glanced at him. “Yeah, well. If you count feeding the insects, we do.”

The amused smile that crept onto Hannibal’s face lifted Will’s mood slightly. They began walking again, skirting the edge of the trees until they came to a dead end. There, they could only head into the woods or into a small, murky body of water that branched off from the nearby canal.

“It should be a direct shot from here to the scene of the crime,” said Will, glancing into the trees. “The victim’s family asked if they could leave a yellow ribbon on the tree where the body was found, to match the memorial, so be on the lookout for that.”

He tucked the case file against his side so it wouldn’t be disturbed by stray foliage and pushed his way into the woods, Hannibal following close behind. It was slightly darker under the trees than he was expecting. Weak gray light filtered in from above, and the ground squelched underfoot. It would be pretty much impossible to see anything here at night. He made a mental note of that.

Hardly five minutes had passed before Will caught sight of a bright flash of yellow against one of the tree trunks. He pushed through the underbrush and found the tree at the edge of a mini clearing, one with barely enough space for two people. He stepped into the clearing warily. Hannibal slipped in by his side, close enough for Will to acutely sense his presence, but without actually touching him. The area didn’t look too different from the photos, except for the obvious lack of a dead body and the addition of the yellow ribbon.

“There’s not very much room for two people in tandem, much less two people where one of them is struggling,” Will said slowly. “So, either he kidnapped her and kept her cooperative with threats of violence, or... No, he must’ve strangled her elsewhere. There’s no evidence of a struggle, no DNA from the killer on the body, no marks or traces of drugs in her system.” He shook his head, brow furrowed. “Something feels off about this in comparison to the last one. The last one was so cut-and-dry. This...” Will struggled to put it into words before he

gave up and said what he felt was obvious. “This one required a lot more thought and planning.”

Hannibal turned his head to look at him without moving from his side. “Our fledgling killer is growing. Evolving.”

Will glanced at him just long enough to make eye contact and then away, shaking his head more vigorously. “That’s not the problem. All killers evolve. The problem is, I don’t see why he picked her. Why her? First a child molester, and then a...a...a *soccer mom*? Those aren’t even *remotely* in the same category.”

“Perhaps he had a personal feud with the victims,” Hannibal said, though it sounded as if he was struggling not to sound amused by Will’s comparison.

Will clenched and unclenched his jaw. “I’m gonna need some space,” he said, instead of acknowledging him.

Hannibal obeyed without a word. Their shoulders brushed lightly as he moved out of the clearing. Then Will was closing his eyes, controlling his breathing, and dipping into the killer’s head again, though he was already losing the thread of who this killer was. He had one last thought as himself before he sunk into his imagination: *why? Why this victim and why this crime scene?*

What am I missing?

Ill-Fitting Suit

Contrary to popular belief, Will's empathy wasn't a superpower. It didn't run on magic or the supernatural or any of that superstitious bullshit. It ran on *evidence*. It ran on knowledge of the human condition and on how much a person's actions could betray who they were and what they believed. If it also ran on his unusually clear understanding of *why* people were inclined to murder (which it did), then so be it. But it wasn't supernatural. Slightly disturbing, yes, but not supernatural.

So when Will was faced with a crime scene that didn't make sense, or a killer whose point of view he was shaky on, things worked a little differently. He still slipped into the killer's mindset, best he could, but it was like an ill-fitting suit. The killer's motivations were unclear or obscured. There were pieces missing, gaps in their design. Sometimes even the surface-level emotions were hard to parse.

This crime scene was one of those suits, with extra space in the shoulders and pants that were slightly too long.

A few things Will knew with relative certainty:

The killer had only killed once before. He was careful, as he'd barely left a trace at each crime scene, and the little DNA that investigators had found didn't match anyone already in the database. His crimes were premeditated, but not lacking strength or depth of emotion. He likely lived in or originated from Metairie, given that his first kill was there.

Will could understand all of that just fine. What he *didn't* understand yet was the killer's motivations.

Raymond Frank Kennedy's death was clearly one of vengeance or vigilantism. But Linda Harrington? It didn't make any sense. She was a wife and mother of three children. She was a soccer mom, a PTA parent, and one of two parent representatives on the local prom planning committee. She was a regular churchgoer and volunteer. To put it lightly, she was a pillar of the small community in Chalmette. So what was the connection? Why did she deserve the death she faced?

Will breathed in and out slowly and squeezed his eyes shut tighter. *It doesn't matter,* he told himself unconvincingly. *Focus on what you know, and the rest will follow.*

When he finally opened his eyes, everything was hazy. Sunlight no longer filtered through the trees, but it was impossible to know what time it was. It could be dawn, or dusk, or an overcast noon, for that matter. He didn't even know if he was in the woods any longer. He didn't know where he had found his next victim, or when, or why, or how. Right now, the only thing that really mattered was that he was about to kill her.

In front of him stood an unassuming middle-aged white woman edging into her older years, her weathered skin giving away decades of tanning and sun exposure. There was no

expression on her face, no flash of recognition in her eyes. She didn't know him. Will wrapped his hands around her throat, and she gasped and reached up to —

But she couldn't have scratched him, because his DNA wasn't found under her nails.

He blinked. Now she was facing away from him; it would be easy to catch her by surprise this way. But that wouldn't prevent her from fighting back...so maybe her hands had been full? Carrying groceries, a purse? Something heavy? But where had that gone?

Will blinked and forced himself to focus. The woman was still facing away from him, but this time her hands were preoccupied. A purse, a phone, it didn't matter. It distracted her long enough for him to wrap his hands around her throat. He relished the life-force slowly draining from her as she choked and struggled feebly. It would feel better without gloves on, but he wasn't an idiot. If he could get away with hacking the last piece of scum to death, he could get away with a more complicated crime, as long as he took the right precautions. He was sure of it.

Will held the woman to his chest as she fell unconscious, keeping a strong grip around her neck even after she went limp. He needed her to stay unconscious long enough that she would be unlikely to wake up without major problems. A splitting headache, damaged airways or arteries, brain damage...any and all of those would do. He counted sixty seconds and then released the stranglehold on her neck, grabbing her by the hair.

Her hair was fake, just like the rest of her. It was time to expose it.

Will took a fistful of hair and yanked. There was a sickening *ripppp* as the extensions were torn from her scalp, taking chunks of her real hair with them. He yanked violently until he held most of her extensions in his fist, then wrapped them around her throat and pulled them as tight as he could, constricting her air and blood flow.

This was how she would go out, choking and suffocating to death on her falsities.

This was his design.

Will held the body up by the lethal extensions, closed his eyes for a moment, and then opened them. He was back in the woods now, except it was so dark he could barely see in front of his nose. He felt a momentary stab of irritation that he didn't know how he'd gotten there or where he'd come from, but he suppressed it. She was dead. That was what mattered. And now he was going to put her on display.

A flashlight held in his mouth, Will hauled the body to a thick tree at the edge of the clearing and propped it up facing him. He tied it securely to the tree with a coil of rough-hewn rope. Then he weighed the small knife in his hand. It was a much more delicate weapon than an ax, but he wasn't here for delicate work. He lunged forward and stabbed the corpse's eyes, leaving them as dark pitted sockets before shaking the excess off his knife into the leaf litter on the clearing floor.

He might not understand it all, but this *must* be his design, because he did it.

Didn't he?

Will jerked and his eyes flew open. His breath hitched as he struggled to adjust to the light after having been engulfed by pitch-black darkness. The mutilated corpse was gone, replaced by the yellow ribbon around the tree, and he was no longer holding a bloodied knife. A thin layer of sweat stuck to his skin.

He breathed in and out, trying to stabilize himself. Who *was* this killer? How could he have gone from never having killed before to a vigilante kill to the cold-blooded murder of a middle-aged mother? It didn't make any sense. There were so many gaps in his design that Will almost wanted to strangle someone for real, preferably the killer himself. Where had the murderer found Linda Harrington? Why didn't anybody know where she had gone in the 24 hours up to her death? Why were there no marks on her body besides strangulation and post-mortem gouging? How had the killer gotten her into the woods in the first place? Where had her personal belongings gone?

What the fuck was up with this killer's design?

Will didn't know how long he stood there without moving. All he knew is that when Hannibal said his name, he finally broke from his reverie. He shoved his hands in his pockets and joined the older man where he waited patiently a few feet from the clearing.

"This crime scene doesn't make any sense," Will said, looking into the trees instead of at Hannibal. "It's as if it was done by a completely different killer than the first one." He shook his head angrily. "I don't know who this killer is or what he wants. I don't even know how he got the damn body here." He started for the car before Hannibal could respond. "And if the next crime scene isn't clearer than this, I'm going to personally tell Jack to shove this case up his ass sideways."

Luckily for Will (especially since the last thing he needed right now was to break down and snap at Jack), the third and final crime scene was much clearer than the last. But before they visited it, Hannibal insisted that they get something to eat. Wary of a repeat of the night before, Will agreed, but only if he got to choose the restaurant. Hannibal acquiesced.

Will drove them to a small, Creole-style hole in the wall in the Lower Ninth Ward that had glowing reviews online. If Hannibal had any objections, he kept them to himself, even though this time, *he* was the one who looked out of place in his three-piece suit. A petty part of Will derived amusement from it. Will ordered seafood gumbo, while Hannibal hesitantly selected a sweet and sour shrimp platter.

The service was quick and the food delicious: rich, well-seasoned, spicy enough to leave the mouth burning a little, and cheap to boot. It boosted Will's mood, at least temporarily, and distracted him from how ill he'd been feeling. He was content enough that he was halfway through his meal before he realized that Hannibal was pausing between every bite to drink water and had refilled his glass once already.

His lips twitched with the beginning of a smirk. "Having a little trouble?"

Hannibal looked like a cat who had been caught in a clumsy act instead of landing on its feet. "I am not accustomed to eating spicy food," he said stiffly.

"Is it that bad?" Will reached over and snagged a shrimp from Hannibal's plate before he could protest. It was a mouthwatering combination of sweet and sour with a tiny bit of kick, but it wasn't even close to being genuinely spicy. A grin spread across his face so wide that his muscles threatened to ache. "I hate to break it to you, but that's not spicy."

Hannibal looked mildly piqued. Without thinking, Will fumbled for his spoon and scooped up a small representative spoonful of his gumbo.

"Here, try this. *This* is spicy."

He held the spoonful out. It wasn't until Hannibal leaned forward slightly, dark eyes locked with his, and put his lips carefully around the spoon that it hit Will how his action could be taken. He swallowed and tried not to stare. He was suddenly hyper-aware of the shape and fullness of Hannibal's lips, as well as the heat pooling in his stomach that he swore had not been there a moment ago.

Hannibal pulled away, swallowed, and licked his lips. Then the moment was broken when he abruptly coughed and reached for his water.

"That is much spicier, yes." He sounded strained, gulping down the rest of his glass and reaching for the water pitcher to refill it.

Will felt his smile return, albeit with a touch of awkwardness. “Should I ask if they have any milk?” he said dryly.

Hannibal waved it away, although he looked slightly pained. “No, no, there’s no need.”

Will nodded and set his spoon back in his gumbo. The men finished the rest of their meal in silence.

After their late lunch, they drove to the third and final crime scene. It was located in Gretna, separated from uptown New Orleans by the Mississippi. With half the land area but about the same population as Chalmette, Gretna was more diverse and slightly more urban than its neighbor, as well as noticeably poorer. Will had a feeling that the previous victim would turn her nose up at this city, though he couldn’t yet pinpoint why.

They took Route 90 into downtown Gretna, where the victim’s townhouse was. Will was struck again by how much Hurricane Katrina had devastated the area. What was once a thriving part of the New Orleans metropolis now sported rundown buildings and the occasional empty grass or mud lot.

Soon enough, they pulled off onto a side street and Will parked. The victim’s townhouse was part of a small complex of townhouses. Isolated from any other residences, the complex was flanked by crumbling businesses and a cemetery. The townhouses looked as if they had once been sky blue, but the paint was now weathered and peeling, faded into a dull gray. Most of the windows were shuttered or blocked by curtains or blankets. Sagging stoops led to the first floor apartments, while thin metal staircases led to the second floors. Only a few cars were parked out front. A red *FOR RENT* sign leaned haphazardly in one of the yards. As with the first victim’s residence, no one wanted to buy or rent a place associated with the brutal murder of its former inhabitant.

Will stopped on the sidewalk and scanned the final case file again. The victim was a 33-year-old Caucasian female, Elizabeth Pfeiffer, found in her apartment in late October. Her death was the most creative one so far: instead of strangulation or death by ax, she was drowned in her bathtub and then partially dissolved in sodium hydroxide. Her body was found three days later — the smell was what alerted the downstairs neighbors that something was amiss.

Pfeiffer’s death was the most high profile of the three victims. Kennedy’s death made a splash mostly because of the unspoken relief of neighbors who hadn’t wanted a registered sex offender living anywhere near their children. Harrington’s death was a big deal in Chalmette due to the small, tight-knit nature of the community and the influential role she’d played, but it didn’t have far-reaching implications. But Elizabeth Pfeiffer?

Her death was big because she was the prime suspect in the murder of her boyfriend.

It was likely the high profile nature of the case that caught the serious attention of the NOPD and ended in connecting the deaths through DNA left at the crime scenes. Will wondered idly how many more people the serial killer could've killed before attracting the FBI's attention if he'd gone for a less *interesting* victim.

He closed the case file and headed up the walk to the victim's apartment, which was in the townhouse closest to the cemetery. Upon closer inspection, the staircase leading up to the second floor was rusty and creaked when stepped on, as if structurally unsound. Hannibal wisely waited until Will had reached the second floor landing before following him up; the stairs might not have been able to hold the weight of both of their bodies at once.

Will unlocked the door with the key given to him by the NOPD. The lock was sticky, and the door squeaked as it opened. The apartment was dim, small without feeling cramped, and devoid of furniture.

Hannibal wrinkled his nose as he closed the door, looking mildly affronted. "The cleaning crew could have done a better job. The place still smells of rot and bleach."

Will spared him a glance and a quiet huff of amusement. "Yeah? Just wait until we reach the bathroom."

Sure enough, the lingering stench was strongest in the bathroom. Will could already feel his headache intensifying, so he dry-swallowed some more aspirin before observing the room. Light filtered in through the bare window above the bathtub. He didn't know much about bathtubs or plumbing, but the tub itself had probably needed to be replaced after holding such a volatile mixture of sodium hydroxide and rotting, dissolving flesh. The walls and floor had been scrubbed vigorously. Still, it wasn't enough to erase what had happened there. The room smelled as though it needed to be aired out; the sharp sting of bleach assaulted his nostrils, and underneath it, something insidious lingered.

"She was killed here," Will said, standing by the tub with his hands shoved in his pockets. "The killer drowned her, then propped her up and added sodium hydroxide to the water — don't know how much he would've needed, but it's easy to get your hands on. It's lye," he added, glancing at Hannibal. "Used in drain cleaner."

Hannibal stood in the doorway, reluctant to step any closer to the offending odor. "He used a base instead of an acid. Interesting."

"Strong acids are harder to get without raising suspicion. But lye? Depending on his line of work, or even if he's just a handyman around the house, he could've had lye for ages before this murder. Wouldn't even have to go out and buy it."

"He's getting smarter about using his resources."

Will scratched his beard and said nothing. He could just imagine Jack's sharp response to Hannibal in his head: *Evidently not smart enough*. Jack would assume the killer had meant to dissolve the entire body, hence leaving part of it behind would be a mistake. But Will wasn't so sure. The killer had been purposeful up to this point; from the way he arranged the body, he must've meant for only half of it to dissolve. The question now was why.

He moved for the doorway, and Hannibal wisely moved out of his way.

It was time for him to pinpoint this killer's design.

Just Alike

Will stood at the bottom of the stairs with his eyes closed, carefully regulating his breathing. Only when he was certain that he had a secure grip on this case did he open his eyes.

It was dusk, the last of the light seeping from the edges of the sky. Every day, evening came a little sooner. He stared up at the second floor apartment. A faint light glowed from behind the blinds. He knew that he wouldn't be caught waiting out here; he had scoped out the area for the past few nights, cataloging when various residents entered and left their apartments. The woman in Apartment 201 came home every day at the same time and never had any evening social engagements.

All the better for him, all the worse for her.

Will ascended the stairs, stepping carefully so as to avoid any loud creaking. Tucked in his jacket was a plastic grocery bag of bottles of lye. He paused at the top of the stairs to grip the small, bent piece of metal in his pocket. He was ready to do whatever it took to get the job done, but he preferred not to spend precious time jiggling the lock if he could help it.

Thankfully, the lock was in bad shape. Either the woman had forgotten to lock it or hadn't been successful in her attempt, because it didn't take long for Will to get in. He eased the door open, keeping the lock pick in his hand as a makeshift weapon.

Inside, a faint lamp glowed on a side table in the far corner. The only other furniture in the room was a battered couch, a plain wooden chair, and a flat-screen TV sitting on the floor. A doorway in the opposite wall opened into a darkened kitchen, and a hallway on the left led to the rest of the tiny apartment. Will moved swiftly and silently across the living room and ducked into the shadows. Faint sounds emanated from the first room off the hallway, and flickering light danced under the door. Will fingered the sharp tip of the lock pick and crept closer. Putting his ear against the door, he heard soft music playing, and beneath that, the splashing of water in a tub.

Will smiled. He wouldn't even have to draw a bath; the woman had done that for him. How thoughtful. The doorknob turned easily, so he swung the door open and strode in.

The woman was lounging in the bath, pale pink bubbles engulfing all of her except for her head and shoulders. The only light in the room came from a series of fat, white wicker candles set up around the rim of the tub. The woman's head snapped up at the sound of the door opening, and she let out a strangled scream.

Will lunged at her, and in the resulting scuffle, he knocked one of the candles into the bath. Water sloshed over the edge of the tub as the candle thudded to the bottom and went out. Two candles were knocked in by the woman's frantic kicking, and another narrowly missed setting Will's hair on fire when he hit it with his elbow. The latter was a blessing in disguise; the candle hit the woman before it fell in and gave Will the chance to find purchase on her slippery skin. The woman's screams were muffled as he shoved her under the water, falling to his knees in the huge puddle on the tile floor. There was nothing the woman could do to free

herself. The inside of the tub was too slippery, and there was nothing for her to grab onto except for Will's wet jacket. He held her under until she stopped moving. Then he sat back on his haunches, breathing heavily.

This was his design.

Will stood and stripped off his jacket, taking out the old grocery bag of lye. He hadn't had to buy a suspicious amount of it, since he'd already had a mostly full container under his sink. Then he sat down on the toilet lid to wait. His knees were not happy that he'd fallen to the floor so hard. When he was sure that the woman was dead, Will pulled her body into sitting position, or as close as he could get to it.

He uncapped the first bottle of lye and wrapped the jacket over his nose and mouth to shield himself from the fumes. The reaction of lye with water was not a pleasant one, especially if the water was already heated, such as in this case. He poured the lye into the bathtub.

As the lye and water mixed, it steamed and hissed, bubbling almost like acid or boiling water, which it was — boiling, that is. Will poured slowly so that it wouldn't splash, but he had on long sleeves and pants, closed-toed shoes, and gloves, just in case. The reaction was enough to raise the water temperature to its boiling point and then above. Whatever bubbly soap the woman had put in the water seemed to help the reaction along, but Will poured in the two bottles of lye anyway, just to make sure. Then he dropped the empty bottles back into the bag, pulled his jacket back on, and tucked the incriminating evidence inside of it.

He stood in the doorway of the bathroom for a moment longer, lingering even as noxious fumes filled the air. It was strangely beautiful. Poetic, even: a murderer found murdered in her own home. The light from the remaining candles flickered off the surface of the sudsy water pooled on the tile floor and sent shadows across the ceiling. And in the midst of it all, the woman lay propped up in the bath, the lye mixture bubbling away. Will's lips twitched up into a vague smile.

"*This* is my design."

But before Will could turn away, a gust of wind extinguished the candles and plunged the room into darkness. He took a step back; his back hit something where there should have been nothing but air. Hands gripped his shoulders painfully tightly, but when he opened his mouth to make a noise, nothing came out.

"This *IS* your design," a hissing voice whispered in his ear, glee dripping from every word. "And do you know why?"

Will struggled desperately, but he couldn't free himself as the voice slipped in and rattled around the inside of his skull: *"It's because we're just alike."*

Will's eyes fluttered open, a scream caught in his throat. For a moment, fear that he hadn't woken up glued him to the spot — something still had a grip on him, although it was no longer too tight. But then he heard Hannibal saying his name, and he yanked himself away, spinning around. Hannibal stood only a pace or two from him, concern creasing his brow and his hands up in surrender.

“I’m sorry, Will. I know you don’t like anyone to interrupt you, but you nearly collapsed where you stood. You could’ve hit your head.”

Will swallowed thickly. His throat felt dry and scratchy, he was covered in another layer of sweat, and his head pounded so hard in his skull that he feared it would break through and splatter all over the tile. The world tilted dangerously. He shoved past Hannibal and escaped the apartment, down the rickety stairs and across the yard. He made it to the edge of the cemetery before he threw up.

Hannibal joined him a minute or so later, his eyes roaming over the vomit and then Will, who was shakily wiping his mouth with his hand.

“The smell,” Will said. “I think it was the smell.”

Hannibal mercifully didn’t comment. Instead, he gently slipped his hand into Will’s jacket pocket and took out the car keys. “Are you steady enough to walk?”

“Um. Maybe.”

Hannibal took that as a “no” and slipped his arm through Will’s. Will gripped the proffered arm with both hands, feeling too sick to protest. Hannibal helped Will into the passenger seat and then got into the driver’s seat, starting up the car as he looked over the map.

“The killer,” Will croaked. “He —” He cleared his throat and laid his head back, eyes closed. “It was another vigilante kill. Better planning this time. He’s...he’s gotten a taste for it. This won’t be his last kill.”

Hannibal hummed. “Jack will be delighted to hear that.”

Will didn’t respond; he didn’t trust himself to open his mouth again.

They drove back to the hotel in silence.

Fevers and Fair Grounds

Hannibal took a different route back to the hotel than Will would have, following Route 90 onto Interstate 610 and taking it into Metairie where it merged with Interstate 10. If Will had had the energy, he would've told Hannibal that he should've turned onto Interstate 10 much earlier, because his current route was very inefficient. Instead, Will pressed his forehead against the cool glass of the window and tried to quell the nausea that still roiled in him. The scenery flashing past didn't help with his queasiness, but he didn't want to close his eyes. He could still hear the echo of the maliciously gleeful voice in his head saying *"we're just alike,"* and he didn't trust his grip on reality enough to sleep.

However, as they drove down Interstate 610, something about the area pinged Will's brain as familiar. The feeling strengthened until they passed along a bridge over the Bayou St. John and Will caught sight of a small green sign: *CITY PARK*.

He was immediately flooded with memories. If they were passing City Park, then they must be close to the Fair Grounds. Will had been to the Fair Grounds only a few times, but each time was vivid in his memory. On the rare occasion that his father had had any extra money, he would take Will there as a treat. It wasn't until much later that Will realized that his father had a gambling problem and that he had been using Will as an excuse to gamble at the race course slot machines, but he tried not to let that soil the good memories he had.

In the summer, the Fair Grounds had horse races and jazz festivals; in the autumn, it had the annual traveling carnival. Will could never afford entry to the races or festivals, so he had always spent those afternoons wandering the nearby cemetery. But the carnival had been free. Sometimes he would have enough change to buy funnel cake or cotton candy or take a ride around the Ferris wheel. Will's chest ached from nostalgia, and he closed his eyes to ward off the pain. As soon as he did, the thought came unbidden: *the killer would enjoy the carnival*. He opened his eyes. Fuck, he didn't have the energy for this right now.

Thankfully, City Park passed in a matter of minutes, as did his nostalgia. Will kept his forehead pressed against the window in a desperate attempt to feel less feverish. Any other time, he would've been hyper-aware of Hannibal's concerned glances in his direction, but if Hannibal was doing so now, Will was oblivious. Getting to the hotel so that he could finish his breakdown in peace was his only priority.

Eventually, they reached the hotel and parked. Hannibal came around to the passenger side and opened the door for Will, holding out his arm as if...well, as if he were a Victorian gentleman and Will were the lady he wanted to woo. *I'm really losing it if that's what came to mind*, Will thought, a little hysterically, but he took Hannibal's arm anyway.

He was so focused on not falling over while also not leaning too heavily on Hannibal — Christ, how did he manage to still smell good after they'd been trekking around crime scenes all day? — that he didn't catch the reaction of the desk clerk as they passed by, if there was one. The tiny part of Will that was still coherent derived pleasure from how uncomfortable the prejudiced old man likely would be by their proximity. It served him right, really.

When they reached their rooms, Hannibal slipped the rental car keys back into Will's jacket pocket and asked, "Where is your room key?"

Will shook his head even as he gripped Hannibal's arm tighter to keep from getting too dizzy. "You don't have to. I'm good from here."

He could feel Hannibal's arm muscles moving under his fingers as the older man glanced at him. "Are you sure?"

Will wasn't sure, but he forced a "yes" from his lips and let go of Hannibal's arm.

If Hannibal was skeptical, he kept it to himself. Instead, he said, "Drink plenty of water and lay down. Rest will do you some good," and stepped away from Will.

After fumbling with his room key, Will closed his door behind him with a loud *snap*. Relief washed over him. He was finally *alone*. He kicked off his shoes, chugged a glass of water and some aspirin, and then flopped onto his bed, too exhausted to change clothes.

This fucking case couldn't end soon enough.

Will was still unsure about closing his eyes, but Hannibal was probably right that he needed to rest. He tossed and turned, unable to get comfortable. A headache throbbed incessantly at his temples. He considered crawling under the sheets, but the room felt burning hot. He stripped down to his undershirt and boxers and pressed his face to a cool part of the sheets with a whimper.

He must have dozed off eventually, because the next thing he knew, he was walking through the old cemetery by the Fair Grounds. The sun was hot and high in the sky, but dark clouds lurked on the horizon, promising a storm. Will kicked at the crumbling ground with scuffed tennis shoes. Jazz wafted on the breeze from the music fest he didn't have money for, and he wrapped his hand around the loose change in his pocket and squeezed until it hurt, until the metal bit into the palm of his hand.

The cemetery's old tombs were ostentatious and intimidating in their grandeur, carved out of marble or weathered stone. Ahead was the tomb he remembered most vividly: while the rest had bare crosses or winged angels mounted on the roofs, this vault had a towering cross on which a figure of Jesus hung, his face contorted in pain, a crown of thorns on his head, and blood dripping from the gash in his abdomen. Will could imagine his marble chest heaving as he slowly suffocated, every rib starkly visible from starvation.

His father didn't take them to church regularly, but the memories that Will retained from their infrequent visits were hazy and unpleasant: sweating profusely in dress clothes that were several sizes too big or too small for him; muggy air made all the worse by the closed windows and congregation packed into the sanctuary like sardines; an old, white preacher pounding the pulpit with his fist as he yelled about hellfire and damnation. Mounted above the altar was a larger-than-life stone depiction of Jesus in agony on the cross, glorified for all to see. "The Passion," they called it.

Will would always remember the twisted face of pain, and how the parishioners around him never spared so much as a second glance at the portrayal of pure agony hanging on display.

Thunder rumbled in the distance as he approached the tomb. It was so tall that Will had to crane his neck to see the top of the cross. If he dared to climb the steps up to the entrance of the vault, he still wouldn't be able to reach Jesus's bony feet. Maybe that was a deliberate design choice; maybe he was supposed to ignore his suffering, just like the adults in his congregation did. Or were they unable to truly *see* the human being on the cross and understand his pain? Was the body on the cross no more than a body to them?

Will took another step forward but was distracted by something to the right of the tomb. Where another stone vault should be, there was a gaping hole in the ground. He could've sworn it wasn't there a moment before. Nobody buried their dead in New Orleans — at least, nobody who wanted their dead to stay buried during flooding season.

The hole stretched so deep that the bottom was not visible, fading into a menacing pitch black maw. Will stepped forward but froze near the edge. Planted into the hard ground next to the hole was a stone plaque.

Engraved into it were the words *Will Graham, 1975-2010*.

Will stumbled backwards, turned, and ran.

The sky was completely clouded over now as he weaved between the old stone tombs and sprinted for the Fair Grounds. The thunder rumbled much closer now. The jazz fest was gone, replaced by the thin spokes of a Ferris wheel silhouetted against a lightning-jagged sky and colorful pop-up tents flapping in the breeze. The whole place was empty.

No matter how hard Will pushed his legs, he felt as if he were running through molasses. There was no one around to help him. He was alone. Desperate for an escape, he ducked into the dark doorway of a nearby tent just as another peal of thunder rumbled overhead and the sky let loose a downpour of rain.

Then something grabbed him.

Will jolted upright in bed, clutching his chest. The fabric of his shirt was wet under his fingertips. He climbed out of bed on shaky limbs and downed another glass of water from the bathroom sink. In the mirror, his reflection looked back at him, pale, sweaty, and wan.

Only one thing echoed through his nightmare-jumbled head on repeat:

The killer would like the carnival.

Dinner To-Go

It wasn't until after Will had composed himself and reentered the bedroom that he noticed a little note, written on hotel stationery, that had been slipped under the door separating his room from Hannibal's. He bent to pick it up and was greeted by graceful lettering, almost calligraphic:

Knock on the door when you wake up. I have dinner. - H L

Will was torn between exasperation and gratitude. Of *course* Hannibal wrote in fine calligraphy, even with a shitty pen on shitty paper, and signed his initials on casual notes as if he were penning a formal letter. Will pulled on his jeans and plaid button-down, which he opted to leave open and unbuttoned over his undershirt, and knocked on the door after unlocking his side. A few moments later, the lock on the other side clicked open, and Hannibal ushered him in.

Hannibal's hotel room was a mirror image of Will's, except neater, with his suitcase and personal belongings all stowed out of sight. Like Will, Hannibal had opted to dress a little more loosely: his suit jacket was draped over a chair, his tie was no longer pulled tight, and the sleeves of his dress shirt were rolled up almost to the elbows. Will ran a hand through his curls, suddenly worried that his nightmare-fueled sweat was noticeably pungent, but if it was, Hannibal mercifully didn't comment. Instead, he pulled a to-go container out of the paper bag sitting on the hotel desk and handed it to Will with a fork and napkin.

"Applewood-smoked scallops with corn grits and mushrooms."

Will opened the container and raised his eyebrows at Hannibal. "You remembered what I said I might order last night?"

Hannibal looked at him with a blank expression, as if Will was the weird one for being surprised. "Yes." Then he took out his to-go container, sat down in the chair on which he had draped his suit jacket, and began to eat. When Will continued to stand there, Hannibal waved his fork at the armchair in the corner. "Please, sit."

Will sat and dug into his food. It was still warm, so Hannibal must have gotten it recently. It was delicious, but Will couldn't help but remember that this entrée cost almost thirty dollars. He decided after a few bites that it wasn't worth starting up the wealth argument again. Hannibal was clearly drowning in money. He could do whatever he damn well pleased with it, even if Will found it to be a waste.

"So," Hannibal said, after a few minutes of silence. "How are you feeling? Better?"

Will frowned and speared a mushroom with his fork. He didn't want to talk about his nightmare. "Better is relative."

"Most everything is relative." Hannibal stood up and got two bottles of water out of the mini fridge, handing one to Will. "That doesn't make our experiences any less valid."

Will grunted. “I’m not worried about validity.” No, he was worried about his *sanity*, but Hannibal would probably label that ‘relative’ as well, and he was not in the mood for that conversation right now.

“What is our killer worried about?”

Will unscrewed the top of his water bottle. “Ethics,” he said slowly. “He’s worried about ethics.”

“Ethics is a very broad category, and, one could argue, quite relative.” Hannibal was looking at him, but Will wasn’t in the mood for eye contact, either, so he drank his water to avoid it. “What ethical code does our killer follow?”

“I don’t know. I’d say some kind of vigilantism, correcting wrongs done by the justice system or citizens at large, but the second murder doesn’t make sense in that context. If we didn’t have a DNA match, I don’t know if I would have connected it to the others.”

“Do you think someone framed this killer for the second murder?”

Will paused, and then shook his head. “No. There’s just...something missing.” He sighed and twisted the top of his water bottle back and forth. “I, uh... There’s an event, either coming up or currently going on, that I think the killer would enjoy. There’s usually some kind of traveling carnival that sets up on the Fair Grounds before Thanksgiving. If it’s happening this year, I think we should go. It’ll...it’ll help my profile.”

“If you think it would be useful, I don’t see why not.”

Will nodded and poked at his food. “I’ll check online before we go to make sure I’m remembering it correctly. If I am, tomorrow is as good as any day to go. It’s not like we have any other leads.”

Hannibal made a noise of agreement. In the silence that followed, his eyes lingered on Will’s half-full to-go container, but he didn’t comment. Will was grateful for that, because he still felt a little queasy from earlier. Instead, Hannibal took the time to finish his dinner and place the to-go container in the trash, and then said,

“Do you have an idea of what time?”

Will, who had gone back to picking through his food, startled slightly and looked up. “Um, depends on when it’s open, but likely in the early afternoon. Sometime after lunch.”

That seemed to satisfy Hannibal, who sat down on the edge of his bed and began to undo his tie. Will assumed that was his cue to leave and closed up his to-go container. He didn’t know if he could eat much more, anyway. He stood, leftovers in one hand and his mostly empty water bottle in the other, and said awkwardly, “Uh, thanks for dinner.”

“It was my pleasure.”

Hannibal stood up and moved to the door to open it for him, but he paused partway, his eyes lingering on Will. He reached out and straightened the collar of Will’s unbuttoned shirt. Then

he lifted a hand to his forehead, gently pushing the sweaty curls away from his face. His calloused hand felt impossibly cool against Will's skin. He was so close that Will could feel his body heat and smell the faint vestiges of his cologne, something spiced and natural, like sandalwood and sage.

"You're running a fever," Hannibal murmured, his breath ghosting over Will's skin. "Have you taken any fever reducers recently?"

Will squeezed his eyes shut to try to concentrate, feeling a little off-kilter. "Um, when...when we got back."

Hannibal hummed. "Good. Take another, and drink more water. That will help your fever, along with a good night's sleep."

He drew away abruptly and opened the door between their rooms, leaving Will free to leave.

"If you need anything, just let me know," Hannibal said as Will walked out, his tone back to being matter-of-fact. "Don't worry about waking me. Good night, Will."

"Good night."

The door closed. Will stood with his back against the door for longer than strictly necessary and waited for the strange heat pooling in his stomach to fade.

To the Carnival

Somehow, what Hannibal suggested must have worked, because Will felt a little better when he woke up the next morning. He finished the cold leftovers from the night before and then sat at his hotel desk, spreading the case files out in front of him. He lined them up in order: the bloody remains of Kennedy, hacked to death with an ax; the strangled body of Harrington, left tied up in the woods; and the half-dissolved remains of Pfeiffer, drowned and propped up in the bath. There was something about having all the photos together that helped him find the necessary patterns to put a killer's mindset together.

Will was so absorbed with the case files that he started when Hannibal knocked on their connecting door. Judging by the sun streaming through the hotel curtains and the stiffness that had settled in his limbs, he had been studying the photos for at least a few hours. Will scrubbed a hand over his beard, let out a breath, and stood up to unlock the door.

Hannibal was dressed in another one of his three-piece suits, this one a light gray pinstripe with a pale teal tie and matching pocket square.

"You do realize we're not going anywhere fancy, right?" Will said dryly as he wandered back towards his desk.

Hannibal's lips twitched in amusement. "I'm aware. Are you ready for lunch?"

Will touched the crime scene photo nearest him absentmindedly, which was of the blood splatters across Kennedy's kitchen table. "Yeah, what time is it?"

"Half past noon."

Will nodded and then rearranged the photos and put them back in their files, not wanting to traumatize the poor hotel worker who might come in to tidy up his room while they were gone. Once he was sure that everything was out of sight and he had everything he needed for the day, the men headed out.

Lunchtime was Will's opportunity to pick where they ate, so he picked another casual New Orleans-style restaurant, this time in the bustling French quarter. Hannibal looked slightly less out of place than he had the day before, but that wasn't saying much. The venue then had been a tiny fast food place where they had sat at a small sticky, round table on spindly bar stools by the window. This place was larger, cleaner, and offered more seating options, but still casual, with brick and wood paneling and music playing somewhere over their heads. There was also a bar. Around the bar, flat-screen TVs were set to various sports channels, none of which were particularly entertaining, given the time of day: sports talk shows arguing about hypotheticals, a rugby match from Ireland, and highlights from a golf tournament from the weekend before.

To Will's relief, they were shown to a table away from the bar, out of sight of the television sets, and with enough natural light coming through the windows to make the place seem open and well-lit — not for his sake, obviously, but for Hannibal's. Will couldn't care less where

they were seated as long as the food was delicious. He thought that he might've been here once before, long ago, and if he was remembering correctly, then they would not be disappointed. Some of the best jambalaya he had ever had in his life had been from otherwise unassuming restaurants in New Orleans, like this one.

Their waitress was in her early twenties, freckled, pale, and chubby, with flat purple hair pulled back in a ponytail and a nose piercing that glinted when the light hit it just right. Will usually tried to tune out other people's emotions, but he couldn't help but notice how she clocked his faint Louisiana drawl versus Hannibal's thick Lithuanian accent. He could practically hear the gears turning in her head as she tried to figure out how they fit together. It was a relief when she took their drink orders and left.

"Have you been here before?" Hannibal flipped over his menu, his forehead creased subtly between his eyebrows.

"Once or twice, I think." Will shrugged and picked up his menu. Seeing Hannibal out of his element always gave him a boost in confidence, and he was feeling that boost currently. "If I recall correctly, their jambalaya is one of the best in New Orleans." When Hannibal merely hummed in reply, Will glanced up and saw that he was still faintly frowning at his menu. "Should I order for you?" Will asked wryly.

He was mostly joking, but Hannibal's expression morphed into one of...relief? Intrigue? If Will hadn't been learning how to read his face, he would have missed it. As it was, he was only partially sure that he was reading him correctly.

"If you would like," Hannibal said, setting down his menu. As quickly as it had appeared, the flicker of emotion on his face had vanished, replaced with unreadable neutrality.

Will snagged Hannibal's menu and slipped it underneath his. When the waitress came back around, he ordered jambalaya for himself and the ultimate taster plate for Hannibal, opting not to explain what he had ordered for him until their food was brought to their table.

"This one is seafood gumbo," Will said, pointing to one of the cups on Hannibal's platter. "That one is Creole shrimp, that's the red beans and rice, that's their signature jambalaya, and then y'also get a piece of Cajun fried chicken."

Hannibal's mouth turned up in a faint smile as he spread a cloth napkin over his lap. "A smorgasbord of regional cuisine," he said, catching Will's eye. His smile was the rare kind that reached all the way to his eyes. "I look forward to trying the best of what New Orleans has to offer."

Will grinned awkwardly and dug into his jambalaya. They ate in comfortable silence, only broken by Hannibal's comments on each dish as he tried them in turn. The most amusing part was watching Hannibal eat the Cajun fried chicken; he ate it properly with his hands, but he still paused between every bite to wipe the grease and crumbs from his fingers, as if they wouldn't immediately get dirty again as soon as he went for his next bite. He also took a sip of water between every mouthful. Will almost laughed, but he refrained.

Eventually, the waitress came by and gave them the receipt. She had put them on the same one without asking, and she bustled away to another table before they could correct her.

Will raised an eyebrow at Hannibal. “Are you going to insist on covering dinner again?”

“That was the plan.”

“Then I’m covering lunch.” Will slipped his credit card into the black book with the receipt, silently daring Hannibal to object. Thankfully, he didn’t. This way, Will could feel as if they were even: he would pick their lunch venue and pay, and Hannibal would pick their dinner venue and pay, never mind the fact that Hannibal picked ridiculously expensive places and spent his money like it was going out of style.

As soon as they’d paid and Will got his card back, he finished his water and stood up.

It was time to head to the carnival.

Approaching the Fair Grounds’ race course, with its colorful tents flapping in the breeze and the Ferris wheel silhouetted against the bright blue sky, felt surreal. The weather was unusually clear, with nothing but a couple of cotton-ball clouds on the horizon. Combined with a temperature of around seventy degrees, it was the epitome of the best mid-November weather New Orleans could offer. Tinny carnival music, laughter, and the smell of popping caramel corn wafted towards them, carried on the humid breeze. Reality felt a million miles removed from Will’s stormy nightmare the night before.

“What’s the plan?” Hannibal’s voice brought Will out of his reverie. He stood by Will’s side, eyes fixed on the people coming in and out of the carnival.

“Not entirely sure,” Will admitted, shoving his hands in his pants pockets. “I suppose the plan is to keep our eyes open for anything suspicious. We’re looking for a white male, likely an adult, and alone. But I don’t even know if our killer will be here. I’m running on a hunch. Realistically, we’re just biding our time until the big picture becomes clearer.”

“Sometimes a hunch is all you need to put the pieces together.”

Will grunted, not really in the mood for Hannibal’s platitudes, but also secretly grateful that he had his company instead of Jack’s. Jack would have pushed him for more information, which he frankly didn’t have. All he had to go off of was a nightmare and a small stack of case files. It was bad enough letting the killer into his head — doing so without a serious payoff was much worse.

“I’ve never been to a traveling carnival like this before,” Hannibal admitted, pulling Will from his reverie yet again.

“Really? Not even once?”

Will glanced at him, and Hannibal met his gaze, the corners of his eyes crinkling.

“Really,” Hannibal said, looking back to the carnival. “The opportunity never arose.”

“Well, now we *have* to try out the booths,” Will said, and even as he said it, he felt his mood lift. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d done something like this for fun, even if it was also for a case. “I was gonna suggest we try things out so we don’t look suspicious while scoping out the place, but if you’ve never been... Hell, we’ll have the entire experience.” Will looked at Hannibal out of the corner of his eye. “You ever been on a Ferris wheel?”

On the Ferris Wheel

It turned out that Hannibal had not, in fact, ever been on a Ferris wheel. He didn't seem too fond of heights, either, if the skeptical look Will caught him giving the Ferris wheel was any indication.

"That looks quite unsafe," Hannibal said, squinting up at the ride as they got in line.

Will tried and failed to keep an amused smile from twitching at the corners of his mouth. "I didn't take you as one to have a phobia of heights, Doctor."

"I wouldn't call it a phobia. I can deal with heights when necessary. This, however..." Hannibal paused.

"Is not necessary," Will finished for him, and Hannibal tipped his head in affirmation. "Look at this way: we can use it to scope out the grounds. When we near the top, we'll be able to see the entire carnival. We'll know where all the booths are and where the crowds are, and we can build a mental map of where we want to go next. Necessary, no. But useful? Yes."

Hannibal pursed his lips. He was still looking at the Ferris wheel with a faint look of either skepticism or disdain, it was hard to tell, but he didn't protest, so Will counted that as a win.

As they waited in line, Will observed the people around them. Nothing stood out as suspicious or out of place. The line for the Ferris wheel consisted mostly of couples, families with younger children, and teens roughhousing with each other, which was the expected demographic. The ride operator couldn't have been older than college-aged, and he looked bored out of his mind. If he was already bored, Will could only imagine how he would feel if his shift lasted the rest of the day. It was an amusing thought.

Hannibal spoke again as they neared the front of the line, disturbing Will from his silent observation. "Is the Ferris wheel here all year round?"

Will glanced at him. "No, why?"

"So it's portable?"

"Yes?"

"And therefore not bolted or secured firmly to the ground."

Will chuckled before he could stop himself. "Ferris wheels used for traveling carnivals are always portable. They have to be, but there are state regulations that they have to meet in order to be used. I wouldn't take you on a ride if I thought it would break down and get us killed."

Hannibal looked unconvinced. However, when they reached the front of the line, he climbed into the passenger car with Will. The car was more of a bucket than anything else; it

resembled a colorful porch swing, but with a metal safety bar that locked into place over their laps, and had just enough room for two people. The operator told them the safety rules in a bored, droning voice. Then they were off and moving.

As the car neared the top of the ride, the carnival stretched out below them, sprawling across the race course in an explosion of color. There were several other rides nearby, including an old-fashioned carousel, bumper cars, a teacup and saucer ride, and a dangerous-looking Tilt-A-Whirl. One section of the carnival featured tents selling art and crafts. Another section held the food stands, offering classics like funnel cake, caramel corn, cotton candy, corn dogs, and pizza, as well as more regional fare. The rest of the attractions were evenly spread out. There were booths and side stalls advertising games of chance or skill, a bouncy house, a fun house, and a children's petting zoo with donkeys, goats, pigs, and rabbits.

Nostalgia tugged at Will's chest. His childhood wasn't the happiest, but he had genuinely good memories of the carnival. However, with Hannibal by his side, he was looking at them differently. He'd never had anyone to explore the carnival with when he was younger, whether they were friends, cousins, or even reluctant acquaintances, so to have someone with him now... It felt very strange to be back as an adult with company this time, even if it was more out of necessity than choice. Strange, but not unwelcome.

The Ferris Wheel came to a slow halt, leaving them about three-quarters of the way up.

"Is this normal?" Hannibal spoke up for the first time since they'd buckled in. His voice was as nonchalant as ever, but Will could tell by how stiff he was sitting that he was anything but.

Most people didn't pick up on other people's emotions the way that Will did, but part of him hoped that his own current, relaxed manner was broadcasting to Hannibal in some way, and that it was calming, even if only marginally. "Yeah, they're just loading the last couple seats. Then it'll go around a couple of times uninterrupted, and they'll let us off."

He glanced at Hannibal out of the corner of his eye just in time to catch his jerky nod. He'd never seen Hannibal so tense, and it threw him for a loop — not that Hannibal's discomfort was obvious, of course; none of the man's emotions ever were. But Will was picking up on it easier than usual. To his highly attuned senses, it felt as if Hannibal was shouting it from the rooftops. It was odd. Seeing Hannibal out of his element was typically a confidence booster. But this?

Will didn't like it.

"The Ferris wheel is the one thing that I always wanted to have enough money for," Will said without preamble. "The funnel cake, too, but if it was funnel cake or Ferris wheel, the Ferris wheel won." He left out the part where if he was hungry enough, he could steal food out from under the carnies' noses; a ride on the Ferris wheel was impossible to steal. "One year, I decided to be adventurous and ride the Tilt-A-Whirl, instead. *Huge* mistake. That damn thing made me so sick to my stomach that I had to sit with my head between my knees for half an hour afterward. Don't ever get on one of those unless you have a strong constitution and don't get dizzy easily. And never on a full stomach unless you're ready to taste your food again."

As he talked, he could sense Hannibal relaxing. By the time the Ferris wheel began to move again, Hannibal was back within his normal range of stiffness, enough to chuckle when Will told a bad joke or said something particularly sarcastic. And by the time their feet were back on solid ground, Hannibal seemed back to his usual self. Will could feel the tension in his own body that he hadn't even known he'd had fade away. He nudged Hannibal lightly with his shoulder as they reentered the crowds. "See, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

"It is certainly beneficial that your trust in the ride's safety was not misplaced," Hannibal hedged. Then: "Where to next?"

If Hannibal were anybody else, Will would have pushed him on it, maybe made a remark about his lack of trust in him. Instead, Will accepted the deflection for what it was and let it slide. "Let's check out the craft fair tents first. Then we can move on to the other booths."

The crowd grew thinner as they approached the tents. Unfortunately, less people meant less places for them to blend in. If the killer was here, Will didn't want to spook him into hiding by being obvious about who he and Hannibal were and why they were there. One bonus, however, was that they fit much better into the demographic of this section of the carnival. Most of the people around them were middle-aged or older adults who were more interested in the art and crafts fair than the carnival rides.

Will and Hannibal walked slowly through the lines of tents, pretending to check out the merchandise. There was no rhyme or reason to the order in which the tents were pitched. One tent was full of colorful handmade jewelry, manned by an old white woman with floaty silver hair all the way down to her knees who was fanning herself with a foldable fan. The tent right next door sold antiques, watched over by a graying middle-aged white man in a rocking chair. The next tent showcased patchwork quilts, pillows, matching bed sets, towels, and the like. Then there was a tent manned by a twitchy young white man surrounded by abstract paintings and prints, followed by a tent with an interracial couple selling homemade soaps and fragrances.

"This is where he's most likely to be," Will said quietly, leaning his head back to speak close to Hannibal's ear. As he did so, he pretended that he was eyeing the merchandise available in the nearest tent, which consisted of homemade candles of all shapes and sizes.

Hannibal hummed. "Has anyone in particular caught your eye?"

"No. That doesn't surprise me, though. We're looking for someone who knows how to blend in very well. The kind of person whose face you forget almost immediately."

"A master of camouflage, blending seamlessly into his environment. Humans are certainly not alone in that endeavor."

Oh. With Hannibal's words, realization swept over Will. "That's how he finds and chooses his victims. They don't truly see him until it's too late." He kept walking, anxious not to stay in one place too long, but he stayed close to Hannibal so they could talk without being overheard. "He'll be more unassuming than I first guessed. If that's the case, I highly doubt we'll find him here, even if he *is* present. There's just not enough for me to go off of."

They reached the end of the craft fair tents and stopped, turning back. Will felt restless suddenly, as if he could run a mile and not feel fatigued. He wasn't sure if it was coming from him or from the killer he was profiling. He decided not to analyze it too deeply.

"Should we pretend to consider buying anything before we go?" Hannibal said, glancing at the nearest tent, which sold elaborate pieces of glasswork.

"No, I don't think so. Let's head back and check out other booths." Will bobbed his head in the direction of the silhouette of the Ferris wheel against the blue sky. "You ready to try out some carnival games?"

Friendly Competition

“Most of the games are either rigged or more expensive than they’re worth,” Will said as he and Hannibal moved through the crowd together. “Some of them use optical illusions and other tricks of perception to make an impossible task look possible, like a ring toss or bucket game. Others just charge a ton of money for a game with cheap prizes. It’s obscene, really.”

Hannibal eyed the stand nearest to them, which was selling greasy funnel cakes, pizza, and hot dogs. “The world is full of obscenities.”

Will noticed where Hannibal was looking and snorted. It was too soon after they’d eaten to eat more, but part of him wanted to wheedle Hannibal into trying some carnival food, just for the hell of it. He tucked that impulse away for later. In the meantime, they slowed to a stop to survey their surroundings.

Will shoved his hands in his pockets. “Do you want to try out a game?”

“Why would I, if the games are rigged?”

“Because it’s a quintessential part of the American carnival experience. If you haven’t been ripped off by one of these games, have you ever really been to the carnival?”

Will kept his expression innocent and unassuming until Hannibal turned to look at him, and then he cracked a grin. The responding smile he received from Hannibal was genuine and amused, the rare kind that reached his eyes and made them crinkle around the corners.

“With that kind of logic, how can I say no?”

The intensity of Hannibal’s gaze was enough to make Will feel the need to look away and pretend to scope out the booths, instead. “Do you have a preference?”

He saw Hannibal shrug one shoulder in his peripheral. “A game or two of skill, then a game or two of chance, if I’m to receive the ‘quintessential American carnival experience.’”

Will’s mouth twitched. *Pretentious bastard*, he thought, only half-annoyed. He swept a hand towards the booths around them and said, “After you.”

Hannibal looked at him for a moment, still with an air of faint amusement, then dipped his head in concession. They set off again at a slower pace. Hannibal seemed content to observe rather than immediately choose a game. That was okay with Will; he had an internal map of the carnival grounds laid out in his head from the ride on the Ferris wheel, but he had little interest in making a decision for him. They walked until they had returned to the Ferris wheel and moved beyond it. Then Hannibal spoke:

“Do you have a favorite carnival game, Will?”

“Uh, it’s been ages since the last time I’ve been to a carnival. But I suppose the shooter games. I’m not half-bad at games of toss, though those tend to be rigged. And you can imagine that guessing games aren’t out of my purview.”

“Let’s try a shooting game, then.”

Will glanced at Hannibal out of the corner of his eye, a little surprised, but he seemed to be totally serious, so he shrugged and acquiesced. They soon found a shooting gallery game to try. It had three barstool seats in front of three small mounted BB guns, which were used to shoot at the blood-red paper stars printed on white sheets of paper hanging near the back of the booth. A group of kids of various ages were cheering on three boys who were trying their hand at it. The object of the game was to destroy the stars; anyone who could get rid of every inch of theirs would win a prize, and the various colorful prizes hanging around the booth were big, indicating the difficulty of success.

They stepped closer. Will let his eyes roam over the booth, taking it all in. It was clear to him that aiming his first shots at the middle of the star would be counterintuitive to winning; shooting at the middle would make getting rid of the star as a whole harder. His best bet would be to shoot out a circle *around* the star, because then the whole star would be blown off by the time he completed the circle. His hypothesis seemed to have some weight, since all of the current players had aimed at the middle first and were having trouble getting rid of the star completely. The guns were loaded with an excess of pellets, but the trigger must have been oversensitive, because the boys ran out of ammunition almost immediately, and thus the line moved fast.

Will leaned closer to Hannibal as they approached the front of the line. “If I win anything,” he joked, “what would you want?”

Hannibal let out a soft chuckle, as if caught off-guard. Then, with a tiny one-shoulder shrug, he said, “Surprise me.”

It was Will’s turn to let out a huff of air. As soon as one of the seats was free, he stepped forward and took it. The seat was harder than it looked and sat lopsided rather than level. The gun was about as heavy as a real one but bolted down to the booth, which limited the player’s ability to adjust its aim. The middle-aged man running the booth went through the rules in a monotone voice and then told him he could go.

Will leaned up to the gun and focused. His first press on the trigger was too aggressive; the gun spat out nearly ten pellets at once and he almost missed his opportunity to test out the gun’s accuracy. His next press was more tentative. Only two or three pellets shot out this time, and he could tell that the gun’s guiding scope was off by several inches up and to the left. Okay, he could deal with that. Will aimed at the white space to the left of the star and then moved clockwise. Sure enough, by the time he had shot out three-quarters of a circle around the star, the star was barely hanging on to the rest of the paper. It took a few tries, but he finally finished the circle and the star fell off and out of view.

The man in charge of the booth looked a little impressed. “Play this game before?” he asked as Will sat back.

Will shook his head. “Just, uh, beginner’s luck, I guess,” he said, and then flashed the man a smile. It felt forced, but the man didn’t seem to notice.

The man pointed him in the direction of the appropriate prizes. Will studied the options and then picked out a black-and-white plush dog, complete with a red ribbon tied in a bow around its neck. The concept of seeing Hannibal walk around the carnival with it was just too funny to pass up. Sure enough, when he returned to Hannibal who had been standing back and watching him shoot and held up the stuffed dog, the look on Hannibal’s face was priceless.

“I won,” Will said unnecessarily, and grinned as Hannibal took the plushie from him and studied it with hesitance. “So, what are you going to name it?”

To his surprise, Hannibal’s expression slowly softened and took on a quality that Will couldn’t quite place. “Mischa. I’ll name her Mischa.” Then he held the plushie out to Will, his expression back to familiar neutrality. “I think it is my turn to attempt the game, no?”

It turned out that Hannibal was *terrible* at shooting a gun, even a shoddy non-lethal version, and while he was a quick learner, it wasn’t enough to save him from utterly failing. Will hid his smile behind the plushie as Hannibal stood up, looking a little disgruntled. He handed the dog back when Hannibal returned to his side and asked, “Where do you want to go next?”

Both men failed spectacularly at the next few games they tried, including ring the bottle, a bean bag toss, and bowling. Hannibal suggested darts next. Will didn’t think anything of it, until Hannibal went first and landed all three of his darts within the bullseye.

“Christ,” said Will before he could stop himself. “You’ve played this a bit before, huh?”

Hannibal looked entirely too pleased with himself, even as he shrugged and hedged, “In another life.”

Will wasn’t terrible at darts — he had played it with people at bars before, whether during college or with colleagues when he couldn’t weasel his way out of socializing — but he still had his ass handed to him by Hannibal. It was Hannibal’s turn to ask him what prize he should pick, so Will chose the coupon for free carnival food and silently vowed to get him to try the funnel cake by the end of the day. Hannibal also got a fake gold pin announcing him a “darts champion,” which he let Will pin to his suit lapel even though it was clear he found it gaudy. Then they took off through the carnival again at a leisurely pace, Hannibal carrying the stuffed dog, pin on his suit lapel, and Will with the food coupon folded in half in his jean pocket.

Eventually, they came across a version of the infamous high striker game. Will slowed as they approached, and Hannibal matched his pace.

“Do you want to give this one a try?”

“Are you challenging me to a pissing contest, Will?”

The question startled a full body laugh out of Will, who had never expected to hear those words come out of Hannibal’s mouth. Will was learning a lot about him today, it seemed.

“Are you interested in a ‘pissing contest’ with me, *Doctor Lecter?”*

“The idiom implies an endeavor that is futile and overly aggressive, but friendly competition is not out of the question.”

Will snorted. “Alright. You’re on.”

The high striker game had a small crowd around it, with a carnival employee standing by it and shouting at everyone who passed by, “Step right up! Step right up! Test your strength!” The crowd was a hodge-podge of people: a group of teenagers, all snickering and shoving each other as they egged someone on to go first; a couple of men with their girlfriends or love interests looking to show off, as well as some dock workers looking to impress each other; and some stragglers here or there who didn’t belong to any group but were curious about the hubbub. Will and Hannibal fit themselves into a gap in the crowd and observed.

The dock workers must have been waiting the longest, because they went first. They took turns hitting the pad with a mallet to see if they could ring the bell at the top. A short but stocky woman got the closest to ringing the bell out of all of them, and the rest of the dock workers clapped her on the back in congratulations and promised to buy her drinks later. Eventually, Will and Hannibal reached the front of the crowd. The employee running the game gestured at them, more aimed at Will than Hannibal, so Will shrugged and stepped forward. He didn’t mind going first. It was understandable, really, given the appearance of Hannibal in his three-piece suit.

Will rolled up his shirt sleeves, picked up the mallet, and stood next to the striker. He really couldn’t tell from the people who had gone before him whether or not the game was rigged, so it was a toss-up. His best bet was to hit the pad as squarely in the middle as possible. He took in a deep breath, imagined that he was chopping wood, and swung. Then he stepped back to see where the bell-ringer landed. It went two marks above halfway, which honestly was better than he’d been expecting.

Will handed the mallet back and returned to Hannibal, who had a faint smile on his face.

“May you hold this, please?” Hannibal asked, holding out his plushie, and Will took it. But Hannibal didn’t step away immediately. Instead, he shucked off his suit jacket and handed that to Will as well. Then he turned away and approached the high striker, rolling up the sleeves of his dress shirt neatly as he went.

Will was struck, not for the first time, by the grace of Hannibal’s movements. He moved a bit like a dancer, as if every movement was calculated to be both efficient and effortless, and this was especially obvious as Hannibal took the mallet and positioned himself next to the high striker. He almost never bared his arms, so it was unusual to be able to see his muscles flex and move under the skin as he tested the weight of the mallet in his hand. Hannibal’s biceps were more obvious without the suit jacket obscuring them. He tipped his head back as if to gauge the height of the bell, and Will’s eyes were drawn to the sharp angle of his jaw and the slope of his neck, interrupted only by his Adam’s apple. When Hannibal dropped his head, Will realized he’d been staring and tore his gaze away.

Then Hannibal swung, and to Will's surprise, the bell-ringer went past where it had stopped for Will's swing and reached only two marks below the bell itself. *Shit*, Hannibal was strong. Will's mouth went dry. What on Earth was a middle-aged psychiatrist doing with that much grace and upper body strength? He had known that Hannibal was not *un*-fit necessarily, but Christ, he was *fit*. Will realized he was staring again and wrenched his gaze from Hannibal's arms.

Hannibal returned to Will's side, and Will handed him back his suit jacket. He resolutely did not watch him roll down his shirt sleeves and put his jacket back on. When Hannibal had resituated himself, Will let his eyes come back to settle on him and held out the plush dog for him to take, which he did.

After a long pause, Hannibal said lightly, "I would say that I 'pissed' farther, wouldn't you?"

Will burst out laughing, and just like that, any lingering discomfort of his disintegrated. "Come on," he said. "There's some food I want you to try."

A Quintessential Experience

The funnel cake was delicious and just as Will remembered it: straight out of the deep fryer and hot enough to burn his fingertips, blanketed in powdered sugar, and filled with a warm, sugary sweet raspberry jam. It was *perfect.*

Hannibal's face as Will dug into the funnel cake was just about perfect, too. Will had grabbed plenty of napkins so that he could eat it properly with his hands, but Hannibal had insisted on asking the bored cashier for a plastic fork and even more napkins. Now they stood off to the side of the food stands, Will pulling the fresh funnel cake apart with his fingers while Hannibal looked at a loss for what to do.

"Come on," Will said as soon as he had swallowed another mouthful. He held out the funnel cake. "One bite won't kill you. You were a kid once, right? You weren't born a middle-aged man in a three-piece suit?"

The corner of Hannibal's mouth twitched as if he were trying not to show his amusement. Will triumphed inwardly; he knew he had won as soon as he saw his lips twitch. He nodded to Hannibal's ridiculous plastic fork and moved the funnel cake closer to him. "Just pretend you're a kid who's dying to eat something unhealthy and have a bite."

When Hannibal continued to look at it without moving a muscle, Will rolled his eyes and added, "Part of the 'quintessential American carnival experience,' remember?"

Hannibal did smile then, a barely there thing, but Will counted it as a victory. Reluctantly, Hannibal moved closer and held the stuffed dog well out of the way of the copious amounts of powdered sugar and sticky red jam. Then he speared a piece of funnel cake on his fork and tasted it. Usually Hannibal was the one who watched people eat, but now it was Will's turn. It felt weird. Almost too intimate, somehow. Will looked away, back at his funnel cake. Hannibal dabbed at his mouth with a napkin.

"So?" Will asked, when Hannibal stayed quiet. "What do you think?"

Hannibal folded up the napkin far too neatly. "It's been a long time since I put that much grease in my mouth."

Will couldn't help it. He laughed. "You don't indulge yourself much, huh?"

"On the contrary. I find the occasional indulgence quite pleasurable."

"'Occasional' does not equal 'much.' And that clearly does not include greasy food."

"We all have our unique forms of indulgence. Yours happens to include funnel cake. Mine..." Hannibal eyed the final pieces of fried dough on Will's plate. "...does not."

Will snorted. "Your loss."

Even though he tried to wheedle Hannibal into taking another bite, Will ended up finishing the funnel cake by himself. He didn't actually mind; he hadn't had funnel cake in *ages*, and one bite was more than he had expected from Hannibal, anyway. Even just buying it was worth the look on the doctor's face.

After Will finished the funnel cake, wiped his fingers, and threw away the mess, the men resumed their slow, appreciative sweep of the carnival. Time had passed more quickly than Will had initially realized. It was late afternoon now, nearly evening, and though the sky would be light for a couple hours more, it had deepened into a bruised ripe blue color, the bellies of the clouds painted in shadow. The carnival was much fuller than it had been when Will and Hannibal had first arrived. That was both a blessing and a curse: a larger crowd meant that the killer was statistically more likely to be counted among the masses, but paradoxically, it also meant that he would be harder to find.

At this point, Will highly doubted that he and Hannibal would find anything to point them towards their killer. They didn't have enough information about who they were looking for to be able to do anything truly useful. Still, something held Will back from suggesting that they give up and head back to the hotel. This was the most relaxed he had felt in a very long time, and Hannibal seemed to be enjoying himself, not to mention that Hannibal had never been to a carnival before. If they were walking around New Orleans on the FBI's dime, they might as well take their time.

They stopped briefly at the petting zoo next. Will couldn't stop himself from laughing when a particularly tenacious goat tried to eat Hannibal's suit pants as he stood near the fence to pat another goat on the head. The incident was enough for Hannibal to suggest they move on, so they did. They walked closer to each other than before to avoid getting separated by the crowd, which jostled them on all sides. Will was about to suggest that they turn back towards the arts and crafts fair section of the carnival, where it was less crowded, when Hannibal stopped and put his hand on Will's shoulder to get his attention.

"What about that one?" Hannibal said in his ear.

"Which one?"

Keeping one hand on Will's shoulder, Hannibal pointed with his other hand to a dark, almost blood-red tent wedged between a weight-guessing booth and a Skee-Ball game with obnoxious flashing lights. The tent's open doorway was veiled by a thin faux crystal beaded curtain, and the large wooden sign above the door read in huge red letters, *AUTHENTIC FORTUNE TELLING!* Then, in smaller letters underneath it, *Famous French Fortune Teller Madame Chrystelle Ball Tells All! Peek Into Your Future And Discover What Secrets Await You!*

Will wrinkled his nose. "You mean the fortune telling tent?"

"Yes."

"Why that one?"

Hannibal shrugged. "It seems interesting. I have never had my fortune told before."

Will scoffed. “Trust me, they have fortune tellers like these all over the South, and they’re all hogwash. *Especially* the ones that show up at carnivals. You’ll just be paying money for someone to make up stuff that’s as vague as possible so that hopefully some of it will apply to you. It’s a huge rip-off.”

“If I recall correctly, just this afternoon, you said that being ‘ripped off’ is a quintessential part of —”

“— the American carnival experience, yes,” Will said, more than a little exasperated. Of *course* Hannibal would use his own words against him now. When Will glanced over at him and saw that he had merely raised an amused eyebrow in response, he knew immediately that he would be fighting a losing battle if he tried to talk Hannibal out of this. Damnit. Maybe he *should’ve* called it a day sooner. Will sighed heavily through his nose and waved a hand in the tent’s direction. “Look, if you really want to, we can, but just remember when we get ripped off that I warned you.”

“Forewarned is forearmed, as they say,” Hannibal said, amusement lacing his tone, before finally letting his hand drop from Will’s shoulder.

Reluctantly, at least on Will’s part, they approached the fortune telling tent. It only had one person outside of it, a white woman sitting on a painted wooden crate and wearing some kind of dark-colored shawl that had to be stifling in the humidity. As they approached, the young woman smiled up at them and said, in an airy, put-on voice, “Are you here to have your fortunes read by Madame?”

Will aggressively avoided eye contact with her while Hannibal responded in the affirmative.

The woman stood and bowed with just her head and neck, a quick, perfunctory movement. “Let me check with Madame. Wait here, *s’il vous plaît*.”

The woman ducked through the beaded crystal curtain and disappeared into the darkness beyond. As they waited, Will leaned close to Hannibal and said quietly, “That woman is probably her assistant. She observes all potential clients and gives the fortune teller a quick read on them before they even enter the tent. Then the fortune teller mentally compares her assistant’s observations with her own when she meets the clients and goes from there. It’s nothing but a game of observation and a competition for who can come up with the most convincing bullshit that people’ll actually pay for.”

Hannibal’s eyes crinkled around the edges. “It could be argued that life is the same way.”

Hannibal was right, but Will didn’t have the energy to deal with any debate or philosophical discussion that he might unravel from whatever response he gave, so he didn’t give one at all. He was too on edge. He might snap at Hannibal, and he really wasn’t in the mood to deal with conflict at the moment.

Of course, Will had told Hannibal the truth when he’d said that fortune tellers were a waste of money, but that wasn’t his only or even his main reason for wanting to avoid stepping into the tent in front of them. If it’d had been only about the wasted money, Will wouldn’t have encouraged Hannibal to try almost any of the carnival’s other attractions. No, what got under

his skin was how too many fortune tellers used their intuition and knowledge of the human condition to manipulate vulnerable people, lying about how they could see the future or talk to the dead when in reality all they could do was make educated guesses based on someone's face, body language, mannerisms, and any volunteered information. It hit a little too close to home. Will was no mind reader, psychic attuned to the hidden supernatural, or whatever else people imagined of him. To see other people claiming those imagined attributes proudly, just to scam people of their money, pissed him off.

There was also another reason, but it was a stupid one, so Will resolutely shoved it down. After all, there was no easy or non-crazy way to explain to Hannibal that seeing the tent brought back nagging leftover impressions from the nightmare he'd had the night before.

Soon, the beaded curtain was pulled back and the woman reemerged. "Madame will see you now."

Will and Hannibal made brief eye contact before Hannibal took a step forward and took the curtain from the assistant, holding it open for Will. Will swallowed his apprehension, steeled himself for the next few minutes, and entered the tent.

It was dark inside, lit up by electric lanterns hanging on the tent walls and electric candles sitting on the fortune telling table. Will's first thought was that the interior décor was unexpected. While the tent had some of the typical markers of a fortune teller's, like the big crystal ball on the red-cloth-draped table, it avoided many of the pitfalls of its brethren. The tent walls were decorated with prints of France and traditional French instruments, rather than stereotypical Romani imagery, draperies, or instruments. There was no incense burning, no pan-witchcraft imagery, and no signs of the "exotic other." Nor was the fortune teller wearing a cheap imitation of traditional Romani clothing. Instead, she wore a simple dark blue wrap dress with a gold bracelet on each of her wrists and a pair of mother-of-pearls dangling from her ears, her dark brown hair left loose and flowy around her shoulders. Will was begrudgingly impressed by the lack of blatant cultural appropriation and stereotypes, though he supposed they could still rear their ugly heads at any moment. Next to him, Hannibal was looking around, as well. Will glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, but it was impossible to guess what he was thinking.

As they stepped further inside, the fortune teller stood up to greet them. "Welcome," she said with a faint but still noticeable French accent, and then she smiled knowingly. "I've been expecting you."

Madame Chrystelle Ball

Chapter Notes

> Hi hello howdy!! I am SO so sorry for the year-long wait between chapters yet again. It really is true what they say about how the hits keep coming and they don't stop coming and they don't stop coming and they don't stop coming.....or however that Smash Mouth song goes. Anyway, you can thank my friend Kabooti for bullying me mercilessly about how long it's been since I last updated this fic till I finally started working on this chapter again. Everyone say thanks, Kabooti!
>
> Shoutout also goes to @apeurodo here on AO3 for leaving such a lovely comment on the last chapter that I felt motivated enough to finally write the last couple of paragraphs of this chapter; Jayse and Zee for always poking me about my writing; and my best friend for always encouraging my progress, no matter how small. To my faithful readers who have stuck around this long (*checks my calendar to see that this fic is almost 4 years old already wtf*), I hope this humble offering even marginally makes up for the long wait.

"I am Madame Chrystelle Ball," the fortune teller said. "Welcome. I look forward to reading your fortunes and unveiling your futures."

She stuck out her hand, although it was an awkward stretch for the men to reach her from where they stood behind the round cloth-covered chairs in front of the fortune telling table. Hannibal politely met her halfway and shook her hand, but Will did not. Instead, he pulled his glasses out of his shirt pocket and put them on, blatantly ignoring her expectant eyes. Will's snub did not go unnoticed. Chrystelle, as she called herself, looked briefly amused before her face settled back into a benign smile.

She motioned to the chairs in front of the table. "Have a seat, *s'il vous plaît*."

Once they were seated, Chrystelle clasped her hands together over the table. She observed them for a moment, her eyes skimming over the cheap stuffed dog in Hannibal's lap, the gaudy badge pinned to Hannibal's three-piece suit, and Will's old dark-wash jeans and rumpled button-down shirt. Then she said, "As you may have seen on the sign by the doorway outside, individual readings are five dollars a person, while a couples' reading saves you money at seven dollars altogether."

"We're not a couple." The words were out of Will's mouth immediately, almost before he could fully process what she'd said. *Excuse me? What the fuck?*

"A joint reading, then," Chrystelle said, clearly unfazed. Her smile didn't falter for even a moment.

Irritation swept through him. First the damn homophobic hotel clerk, and now this? Will understood that he and Hannibal didn't exactly look as though they were *colleagues*, given how dissimilarly they dressed, but to jump right over the possibility of them being friends to them being a *couple?* It was a stretch that Will hadn't imagined that multiple people would make, especially within two days of each other. He frowned and looked at Hannibal, who immediately met his gaze over the rims of his glasses. The faint crinkling around the corners of Hannibal's eyes and the slight tilt to his lips betrayed his clear amusement. Will supposed that such an obvious mistake by someone who was supposed to be good at reading people *could* be kind of funny — that is, *IF* he wasn't already irritated that he had agreed to do this at all.

Will sighed, leaned back in his seat, and waved dismissively in Hannibal's direction. "You're the one who wanted to come here, so pick whatever you want."

Hannibal turned back to the fortune teller and said, "A joint reading, please."

Ugh. Of course.

Will took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, briefly closing his eyes. Just a few minutes, he told himself silently. A few minutes, and this questionable experience would be over. He could find the patience for that, right?

"Excellent choice." Chrystelle picked up the nearest deck of cards and began to shuffle it. The deck was much bigger than a typical deck of playing cards, and the cards were stiffer, too. The backs of the cards were black with an elaborate gold filigree-like design, and when Will caught a glimpse of the card faces, he had to admit that the artwork on them was very well-done. No cheap Tarot cards for this woman, apparently. Another begrudging point in her favor.

Then the fortune teller spoke, and Will immediately took the point away.

"The joint reading comes with both a three-card spread and a crystal ball reading. You are in good hands, as I'm particularly well-known for my crystal ball readings." Chrystelle winked as the cards formed a bridge between her hands.

One of Will's eyebrows twitched. If it hadn't already been glaringly obvious that this woman operated her business under an unoriginal, cheesy pseudonym, her joke certainly would have driven the point home. It was tempting to roll his eyes, but it was better that he didn't; as Chrystelle shuffled the cards, she kept her sharp eyes trained on them. He swore that almost a minute had passed without her blinking. It was borderline creepy, and Will dealt with dead bodies and murderers for a living.

"*D'accord*, why don't we start off with introductions?" Chrystelle asked as she passed the cards back and forth between her hands, her eyes still focused on them.

"If you can see the future, don't you already know what our names are?"

...okay, so just because Will wasn't going to roll his eyes didn't mean that he couldn't call her out on her bullshit. There was only so much self-control he had.

Chrystelle smiled patronizingly, and Will was reminded suddenly and violently of Freddie Lounds. They didn't look much alike, but there was something intangible about the woman in front of him that led his mind to connect the two.

He disliked her immensely.

"Reading fortunes is different than being able to recite facts about a person," Chrystelle said smoothly. "While the names we give the world around us are important, they are not something that I can pluck from the ether."

What bullshit.

Will crossed his arms. There was no way he was giving this lady his surname, so just his given name would have to do: "Will."

Out of the corner of his eye, Will saw Hannibal move slightly, but he refused to glance over at him. So he was strangely relieved when Hannibal followed his lead and only gave his given name: "Hannibal."

Chrystelle raised an eyebrow at Hannibal, still smiling benignly and shuffling the tarot cards. "Ah, *c'est vrai?* Like the Roman general?"

"The Carthaginian general, actually. He went to war against the Romans, not for them."

Will coughed into his fist to hide his laugh.

Seemingly unbothered, Chrystelle turned her serene smile on Will. "And what about you? Is Will short for William?"

"No. Just Will."

"Well, Just Will, it is very nice to meet you."

Will bit back a sarcastic retort, something like, *I can't say the same*, or *shame it isn't mutual*. Instead, he said nothing.

Silence fell over the three of them except for the sound of the Tarot cards being shuffled. Then Chrystelle straightened out the deck, her demeanor turning more serious.

"Okay, *d'accord*, are you ready for the first part of your reading?"

Both men nodded.

"Before we begin, I will need your help to shuffle the cards." Chrystelle split the deck and passed each of them half. "Tarot cards work best when the person whose fortune is about to be told places their energy into the cards before the reading."

Will reluctantly took the cards that the fortune teller held out. As he gave them a perfunctory shuffle, Chrystelle kept speaking:

“There are two main types of Tarot cards, the Major and Minor arcana. The Minor arcana are split up into four suits: cups, wands, pentacles, and swords. You can think of them as equivalent to a regular deck of cards, where the Major arcana are the face cards — the King, the Queen, et cetera, *comme ça* — and the Minor arcana are the numbers, complete with the four different suits.”

Will subtly checked his half of the Tarot cards as he shuffled them to see if Crystelle had included both kinds of cards, or if this deck was cut to only have a specific kind. So far so good; he caught glimpses of both Major and Minor arcana, and the ratio between them seemed good, too. She hadn’t taken the easy way out there, at least. Of course, that was the bare minimum for any decent fortune teller, but Will wasn’t expecting much in that regard.

“Tarot has a long, storied history,” Chrystelle continued. “It is an art form that has been around for hundreds of years, first surfacing in rudimentary form as early as the fourteenth century...”

Will glanced at Hannibal out of the corner of his eye. The doctor seemed to be listening intently to the fortune teller’s words. All the more power to him, but Will wasn’t here for a history lesson. He focused instead on what he could deduce from the fortune teller’s body language. Was she using her storytelling moment to mask anything? It didn’t seem like it. Her hands were folded neatly on the table in front of her, and there didn’t seem to be any place where she could hide extra cards or pull any kind of funny business to make for a “better” card reading. She was observing them rather closely, however, so he wanted to put a quick end to that. He finished shuffling and placed his half of the cards on the table, and Hannibal followed suit.

Chrystelle thanked them both, put the stacks together, and did one quick bridge to overlap the cards into one cohesive deck. Then she spread the Tarot cards out into a large fan in one smooth movement, clasping them in both hands. But instead of holding them out for the men to take, she held the cards close to her breast and leaned across the table.

“Remember,” she said, looking at them both very seriously, “this is a joint reading, so what we discover here will apply to both of you or your relationship. While there may be some things that seem to only apply to one of you individually, no man is an island and those things will also affect you as a unit, so keep your mind open.”

That was *exactly* the kind of disclaimer that Will would expect a fraud to use to cover her ass when aspects of her fortune inevitably didn’t line up with their lived experiences. At least there were no surprises so far.

Chrystelle held out the fan of cards. “Will, you pick first, *s’il vous plaît*. Please do *not* look at the card yet, just place it face down on the table.”

Will studied the cards and how she was holding them. Nothing stood out as unusual, but he was sure that there were cards that she would rather him pick than others. Like a street magician doing a card trick, there were plenty of ways to manipulate a person into picking the card you wanted them to pick without them knowing. He wasn’t exactly sure how that would work with Tarot cards versus a typical deck of playing cards, but there had to be ways.

Will reached out and carefully maneuvered the second-to-last card on the far right out of the spread and placed it on the table in front of him.

If Chrystelle had any feelings about the card that he picked, it was impossible to tell. She merely thanked him and then turned the fan of cards towards Hannibal.

“Hannibal, please pick a card and do not look at it yet, just place it on the table face down.”

After a moment’s contemplation, Hannibal stretched out to pull a card from the side of the fan that was closer to Will and placed it on the table next to Will’s card. Will wondered if he was thinking the same thing about subtle manipulation and thus picked a card farther away from himself, rather than one of the cards actually in front of him.

Again, if Chrystelle had a problem with this, it was hard to tell. Her face stayed serious but unreadable as she moved the fan of cards so that it was now equally facing both of them.

“*Bon, merci*. Now, please pick one together. Remember, do *not* look at it yet.”

Will met Hannibal’s eyes. Hannibal’s expression was hard to read, but he must have gotten what Will was transmitting, because he turned slightly away from the fortune teller, leaned his body towards Will, and said quietly, “How do you want to do this?”

Will dipped his head closer to Hannibal and murmured, “We picked from the right-hand side for the first two, so maybe something in the middle or on the left? Unless you think we should choose from the right again. If we shuffled them properly and she didn’t mess with the cards, then statistically, it shouldn’t matter where we pull them from, right?”

“Unless, as you said, she skewed the cards.”

“What are you thinking?”

Hannibal was silent for a moment. Then he said, “I am inclined to agree with you. Whether or not the cards are skewed, picking from the middle seems to be a safe bet.”

“The middle it is.”

They straightened back up. Will felt an instant spike of irritation as soon as he saw the fortune teller’s face. The way that she was watching them like a hawk about to swoop down on unsuspecting prey was exactly the reason why he didn’t want her overhearing their conversation about which card to pick. She was already doing her darndest to make extrapolations based on their behavior and body language — never mind the fact that she was dead wrong in all her conclusions so far — so Will certainly didn’t want to give her anything else to work off of for their “fortunes.”

Unfortunately, now came the most awkward part: trying to choose a card together without one or the other of them leading the way, and knowing that the fortune teller would be watching them the whole time. Will did his best to tune her out, but it was difficult when she was right across from them and her intense focus was broadcasting to him so loudly. Will *hated* people like that. Why couldn’t people keep their emotions and motivations in their own

damn heads and leave him to his own? At least he never had to worry about that with Hannibal.

Hannibal reached out for the fan of cards, so Will forcefully switched his attention away from the fortune teller and did the same. Their hands met over the same couple of cards in the middle, and Will was relieved to find that picking a card together was easier than he had anticipated. They both ended up touching one card in particular, their fingers overlapping, so all Will had to do was help Hannibal tug it out of the fan and then sit back and let Hannibal set it on the table next to the other two cards.

It was a small mercy that Chrystelle kept whatever thoughts she may have had about their selection process to herself. Instead, she thanked them and straightened out the cards so that they lay directly between Will and Hannibal on the table.

"*Très bien*. Now, before we begin, let me explain how a Tarot reading works." Chrystelle gestured to the three cards spread out on the table. "These three cards that you just picked together represent your past, your present, and your future respectively. *However*, and I cannot stress this enough," she leaned in, her eyes boring into them, "these cards are *not* prescriptive. They can give you the tools to analyze your past, interpret your present, and plan for your future, but they do not control your Fate, they merely help you illuminate your life. Try not to come to any hasty conclusions, and let yourself sit with the reading you receive before making any big life-changing decisions. Fortune telling is a delicate, nuanced art that is meant to enhance your life, not restrict it. It is not the same thing as Fate, though again, it may help illuminate it for you. Understood?"

Chrystelle was clearly so serious about what she was saying that, for the first time since entering the fortune telling tent, Will didn't have it in him to be snarky, even if his skepticism was still in full force. He was beginning to think that she might actually believe what she was saying, which would separate her at least from frauds who knew that what they were doing was fraudulent. He wasn't sure what was worse, someone knowingly manipulating people, or someone with genuinely good intentions leading other clueless people astray out of belief in the fraudulent thing they were peddling. Regardless, under Chrystelle's intense gaze, Will and Hannibal both murmured their understanding of her expressed caveats.

"*Oui, bon*. The first card overturned will represent your past, the second your present, and the third your future," Chrystelle said, tapping each card with a fingertip as she mentioned it. "I will interpret each card on its own before flipping over the next one, and then we will look at the big picture when they have all been turned over. Are you ready?"

Again, the men gave their assent. With a small flourish, Chrystelle flipped over the first card. Despite himself, Will found himself leaning forward slightly to see what it was.

Lying there, face up on the table, was The Devil.

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